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ELLERY QUEEN

THE WORLD'S LEADING MYSTERY MAGAZINE

WPS 36006

Have yourself a scary little Christmas

with

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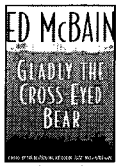

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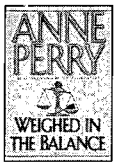

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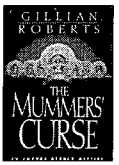

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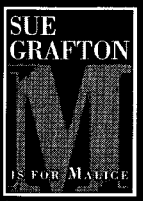

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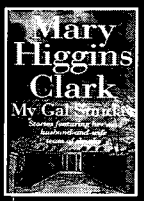

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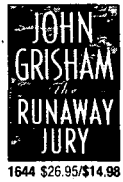

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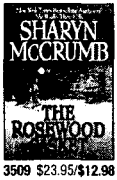

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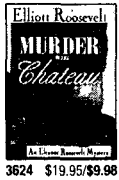

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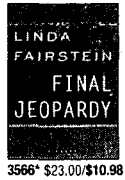

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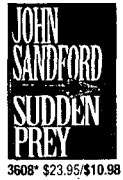

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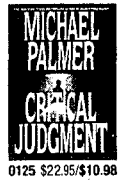

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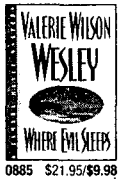

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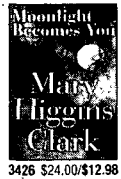

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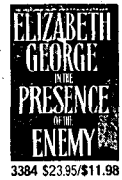

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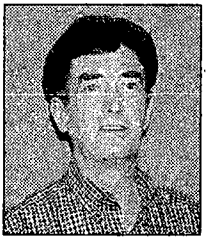

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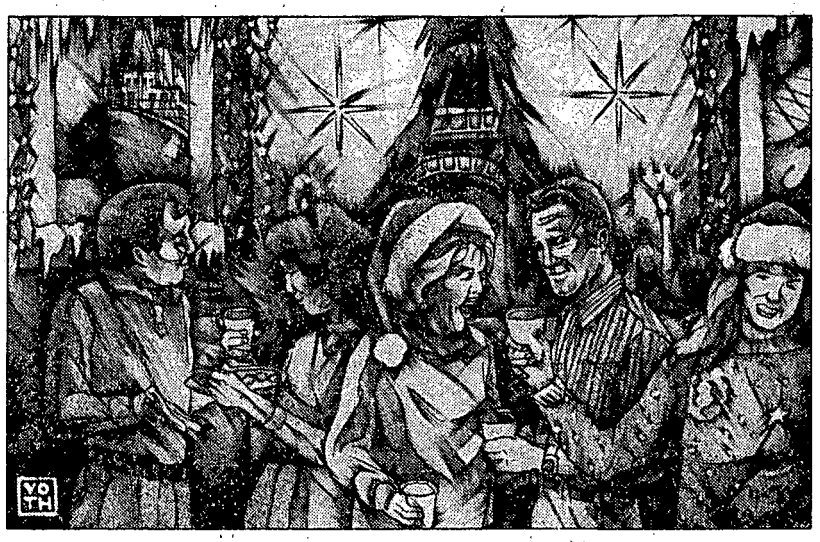

Art by Greg Voth

YULETIDE JUSTICE

by William Bernhardt

Ben Kincaid tried to stay on his feet as he skidded down Main Street toward his law office. It seemed as if Tulsa never got snow anymore, especially not at Christmas time. What Tulsa did get was ice. Ice storms. Treacherous, nasty, slippery ice. Not the Jack-Frost-nipping-at-your-nose type. The three-car-collision-phone-lines-down-city-looks-like-a-freezer type.

Ben hated winter. Well, not as much as summer, perhaps, when everyone expected you to play tennis or jog or, God forbid, buy a boat. Actually, he thought, winter was fine when you were safely at home snuggled up in a blanket with a mug of hot chocolate and a blazing fire and a good Trollope novel. It was miserable only when you had to go out. His car wasn't worth a flip on the ice and his feet weren't much better.

Blast Judge Hart for making him come to court, anyway. It was hardly necessary to have the preliminary hearing today, Christmas

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Eve. Speedy Trial Act or not, no one was going to complain if she postponed this a few days. The federal courthouse wasn't even open. No, it was just her perverse sense of humor, or perhaps her sense of poetic justice. She wanted the hearing held before Christmas. Since the defendant was Santa Claus.

Ben had scarcely been able to believe it when Kris Kringle took the stand, in full red-and-white fur regalia. It was like something out of *Miracle on 34th Street,* except this time Santa wasn't being tried for being crazy. This time he was being tried for grand larceny. Apparently this artful shopping-mall Santa had been dipping his hand surreptitiously into Moms' pocketbooks while Junior sat on his lap.

Sheesh. 'Tis the season . . .

Ben rounded the corner onto the street where his office was located. It was all downhill from here, so he decided to let himself go. Pushing off from the stop sign, he began his descent, sliding down the icy sidewalk. He extended his hands, trying to maintain his balance. He looked like a surfer from one of those wild sixties movies. Dr. Goldfoot and his Icy Legal Briefs. Very cool.

It was only after Ben was two-thirds of the way down the street, and speeding increasingly out of control, that he noticed the obstacle. The plump red obstacle. Another Santa, this one shaking a bell over a large kettle set up outside Clyde Burris's pawnshop. Ben was on a collision course with St. Nick, and he had no way to put on the brakes.

Santa never knew what hit him. Ben collided full throttle, knocking the right jolly old man to the pavement. Ben fell the other way, banging his head against the metal kettle.

"What in the—" Santa finished his sentence with several colorful expressions that didn't bear repeating.

"Watch your language, Santa," Ben said, rubbing his sore skull.

William Bernhardt made his debut as a novelist in 1992 with the national bestseller *Primary Justice.* With seven novels now in print, he has been described by the *Vancouver Sun* as "the American equivalent of P. G. Wodehouse and John Mortimer." Although he currently writes full-time, the author once made his living as a trial lawyer, like his series character Ben Kincaid. ✝

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"Watch where the hell you're going," Santa replied. With some effort, Santa struggled back to his feet. "Are you all right?"

"I'll live." Ben took the man's hand and let himself be pulled to his feet. "Your midsection was a lot more solid than I anticipated."

"Don't use padding," Santa said, as if this was a matter of pride for him. "Don't need it. Got my own."

"Great." Ben picked up his briefcase and brushed himself off. "You're not related to the Santa I just left at the courthouse, are you?"

"What, you think we're all clones?"

"I suppose not." Ben started toward his office.

"Since you're here," Santa said quickly, "how about donating a little something for the needy?"

"That would include me," Ben replied.

"No, I mean needy needy. Like can't pay the rent needy."

"You still haven't excluded me," Ben said. "But here." He scooped all the change out of his pockets, tossed in a few dollars, and dumped it in the kettle.

Santa smiled. His eyes, how they twinkled. "Merry Christmas."

"If you say so."

Ben stepped through the front door of his office and was immediately assaulted with a kiss on the cheek.

"What on earth—"

It was Christina McCall, his legal assistant. Her strawberry-blond hair was drawn back in a holly-shaped barrette. She was dressed in a red-felt elf outfit with bright green shoes that curled up at the tops. Haute couture Christina, Christmas-style.

"What is the meaning of this unaccustomed display of affection?" Ben inquired.

"What do you think?"

"I have to assume your long pent-up, smoldering passion for me has finally bubbled to the surface."

"Guess again, lover boy. You're standing under the mistletoe."

Ben checked the ceiling. Sure enough, there it was. In fact, there was so much of it that it would be difficult not to stand under the mistletoe.

Now that Ben noticed, his whole office had been decorated in a festive holiday manner: holly wreaths on the doors, a small tree in the corner with twinkling lights, and a stand-up prop of Santa and his reindeer.

"I assume this is your work, Christina?"

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"You assume correctly."

"I thought you were having a party at your house tonight."

"I am, but that's no reason why we can't start celebrating at the office." She handed him a paper cup filled with a reddish punch.

"What's this?"

"Wassail. Give it a try. You'll love it." She held up her own cup. "Cheers."

"Likewise." Ben took a swig. Sweet, fruity, and heavily laced with alcohol. He nearly gagged.

"So, are you coming to my party?"

"Oh, gee, Christina." Ben shifted his weight and looked the other way. "I don't know. I really hate all this holiday stuff."

"You could still come. I won't make you sing 'Silent Night' or anything."

Ben squirmed uncomfortably. "Nothing personal, Christina, but . . . I'd rather not."

"Oh," she said quietly. "I see."

"It's just—I find all this Christmas hugga-mugga very oppressive, you know?"

"Bah humbug, eh?"

"It isn't that. I don't care what other people do. If they want to be all fake grins and goodwill toward men, great. But leave me out of it."

"Ben, you may be mildly neurotic, but I know you're a good person, deep down. Deep, deep down. How did you ever come to be so negative about Christmas?"

"I suppose it's because my mother always made such a terrific fuss. She bought a pre-decorated tree, hired professionals to green the house. We were barely permitted to breathe for fear that we might mess it up. We weren't even allowed to tear the wrapping paper on our presents; we had to pry open the Scotch tape and take it off in one piece. Then all the relatives we never saw the whole rest of the year came over, pretending they thought my rich daddy was the greatest guy in the universe. If that's Christmas spirit, I'll do without."

Christina frowned. "So just because you had some bad experiences as a kid, you don't think Christmas has any meaning."

"Oh, I think it has a lot of meaning. Especially if you're in retail." He went through the motions of yawning and stretching and surreptitiously hid his cup behind a typewriter. "I just don't much care for the meaning, that's all."

"Boss! How about some wassail?"

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It was Jones, Ben's office assistant, standing across the punchbowl from Loving, their private investigator.

"Thanks, but I—"

Jones rushed forward and pressed a cup into Ben's hands. "Gee, thanks . . ."

"Great decorations Christina made, huh?"

"Yeah, great."

"I can't wait to see how Christina's decorated her apartment. You're coming over tonight, aren't you?"

"Unfortunately, I think I have another engagement." Ben dropped a pencil on the floor and, while recovering it, unobtrusively deposited his cup in the trash can.

"Visiting your mother?"

"No. She's in Paris for the holidays."

"Sister?"

"She's somewhere in Connecticut, last I heard."

"So . . . it's going to be you and your cat tonight?"

Ben smiled thinly. "Something like that."

"Merry Christmas. Meeeeeerry Christmas."

Loving was swaggering over from the punchbowl, all two hundred and fifty pounds of him. Ben got the distinct impression that he had drunk a bit too much wassail.

Loving thunked Ben on the back so hard Ben fell three steps forward. "Merrrry Christmas, Skipper."

"Well, same to you . . ."

"This stuff's great." He noticed Ben's empty hands. "Don't you got some? Here, take mine."

"No, really—"

Loving forced the paper cup into Ben's hands.

"Thanks," Ben murmured.

Loving hiccuped. "Wassa matter, Skipper? Ain't you got the Chissmassss spirit?"

"Well, actually, no. I gather you're a big believer in this so-called Christmas spirit?"

"Me? Nahhhh." His cheeks flushed red. "It's all a plot by the multinational corporate consortium. Economic sabotage."

"Do tell."

"But what the hell!" Loving broke out with a broad grin. "Merrrrry Chrissssmassssss."

Ben rolled his eyes. Enough already. Time to get home to his Trollope.

"Ben! Look at this!"

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Ben hurried over to Christina's side.

"Look at all this moolah!" She opened an envelope and spread five hundred-dollar bills on the table.

"Where did that come from?"

"Harvey Flickinger. You remember, the rancher you did the estate plan for. The guy with all the poultry. He finally paid up. In part, anyway."

Ben picked up the yellow Post-It stuck to one of the bills. HAPPY XMAS, it read. DON'T SPEND IT ALL IN ONE PLACE.

"Ben!" Christina grabbed his shoulder. "With all this loot, you can fly out to Connecticut to see your sister."

Ben slid the cash-filled envelope inside his jacket. "I don't think so." Truth was, although there had been some improvement in recent years, Ben was still estranged from his family, especially his sister. They had never gotten along. He hadn't seen her in years. He didn't even know what city she lived in.

"Ben . . . Christmas is for family."

"Is that right?" He shrugged. "Well, thank goodness I have a cat."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. I don't have a family, Christina. I don't even know what the word means."

The bell on the front door clanged. Ben turned and saw Clyde Burris, the owner of the pawnshop next door. Relations between Ben and Burris had been rather chilly ever since Ben had represented a deadbeat Burris was suing a few years back. They'd become mildly cordial of late, but were still anything but friendly.

"Kincaid, I need some help."

Ben nodded. "I've thought so for years."

"Ha ha. Look, I keep hearin' about what a hell of a great problem solver you are. Think you could step over for a minute and solve one for me?"

Ben considered his options. He couldn't get too worked up about Burris's problem. On the other hand, if he stayed here any longer, someone was bound to force some more of that wassail on him.

"All right," Ben said, setting down his cup. "Let's go."

It was snowing when Ben stepped outside his office with Burris. It seemed the forecasters were wrong; it was going to be a white Christmas in Tulsa after all. Ben was glad he didn't have far to go. Snow on ice was not a good combination. Mix in darkness, rush hour, and a lot of stressed-out Tulsans who didn't know any-

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thing about driving on ice, and you had an extremely dangerous situation.

They half-walked, half-groped their way to Burris's office. As they approached, the electric eye above the front door lit and the door swung open—barely. Despite being thin, Ben was just able to squeeze through.

"Kind of narrow, isn't it?"

Burris frowned. "That damned door hasn't worked right since I put it in."

"Then why—"

"I kinda like it this way. Keeps people from sneakin' out with a television when I ain't lookin'."

Whatever. Ben slid into the pawnshop and took a quick look around. The place was even more cluttered than he remembered; perhaps pawnshops stocked up for the holidays like everyone else. The shelves were spilling over with televisions and VCRs and camcorders and stereo equipment. A layer of dust covered every surface.

He noticed three other people, apparently employees, huddled in the corner, eyeing him anxiously. "What happened?"

"Well, it's a real mystery. I had four hundred dollars, four crisp Ben Franklins, and I laid them down on this here counter and stepped outside. And when I came back, they were gone."

Ben's eyes narrowed. "Let me see if I've got this straight. You left four hundred smackers in cash in plain view, in a pawnshop, and disappeared."

"Right."

"And you call this a mystery?"

"Well, ain't it?"

"The only mystery is how someone as miserly as you could be stupid enough to leave your money lying around."

"Well, it wasn't mine. Not exactly."

"Whose was it?"

"My staff's." Burris motioned, and the three individuals in the corner stepped forward. "This is Howard Kovack." Burris indicated a tall, angular man who towered over Ben. The living embodiment of John Carradine, Ben thought, and ready to shoot a horror flick of his own. "He handles the cash register."

That alone should've been enough to prevent any thefts, Ben thought. But evidently not. "Do you handle the money?"

"Normally . . . yes." Kovack had a protracted, lugubrious way of speaking that, all in all, suited him well. "I . . . take it in all day . . .

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and I count it up . . . at closing time. . . . But this money . . . didn't come from the cash register."

"Where did it come from?"

"My pocket," Burris explained. He pointed to a fair-haired man standing beside Kovack. "This is Wayne Eddings. He's a stock boy. Stocker and stacker."

Ben reached out to take his hand. Despite the fact that Burris kept referring to him as a boy, he was at least in his mid thirties, probably older. "Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too."

"And this is Cora Anderson. She's our handyman and fixer-upper."

Ben turned toward the woman and did a double take. "You're the handyman?"

"That's right," Cora said. "What of it?"

"Well, I just . . . I mean . . ."

"I'm seventy-two years old, sonny, if that's what you're dancing around. And I can fix up a roof like a young pup of sixty."

"Well, no doubt, but—"

"Don't believe me? Want me to bring a few shingles over to your place?"

"No, thanks. I rent."

"Cora's been a big help to us this past year," Burris explained.

Cora raised her chin. "It's given me something to do."

Ben nodded. "So the stolen money belonged to all of you?"

"Oh no," Burris said. "Just one of them."

"Just—" Ben frowned. "Which one?"

"That's just it. They didn't know."

Ben pulled out a chair for himself. This was obviously going to take awhile. "Forgive me for being dense, but I'm not following this at all."

"It's like this," Burris explained. "I wanted to give Christmas bonuses."

"Very commendable."

"But I couldn't afford to give everyone one."

"I thought you told me your business was a huge success?"

"Yeah, and you don't get to be a huge success by giving all your money away in Christmas bonuses."

"Ah. Proceed, Ebenezer."

"So I set up a little contest. Kind of an employee incentive plan. Top employee gets the Christmas bonus. They get a chance to

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make some money, and I get to see my employees work their butts off trying to get the bonus."

"You're a true humanitarian, Burris. But all three employees do different things. How can you decide who's most productive?"

"The final decision rests in the sole discretion of the judge. Me."

"Ah."

"That way," Cora explained, "he has the added bonus of seeing his employees fall all over each other to lick his boots."

Burris looked down his nose at her. "And that attitude explains why you weren't even in the running, Cora."

She stuck out her tongue at him.

"Seventy-two years old," Burris murmured. "And so mature."

"So why did you leave the money on the counter?" Ben asked.

"I was about to present the award. I wanted to draw out the suspense."

"And you went outside?"

"Needed to take a smoke. And I wanted to give them one last chance to make their case."

"So you all went outside?"

"Right."

"Then the thief had to be someone else. A customer, perhaps."

"You'd think so. But the shop was empty when we stepped out. And we never left the sidewalk. No customers went in, no customers went out."

Ben's forehead creased. "I see. That is a problem."

"Problem? It's a regular—whaddayacallit—a locked-room mystery."

"Yeah," Ben said, "except the room wasn't locked."

"Well, anyway . . ."

"Who first noticed the money was missing?"

"I did," Cora said. "I heard the phone ring, so I came in. The others followed a few moments after."

Ben looked at Burris. "Including you?"

"Naw. I finished my smoke."

Ben tried to think of the most delicate way to say this. "Then . . . if you came in after them . . ."

"You think they did it?"

"Not that I'd ever suggest that your employees would—"

"You think I'd call you in if I hadn't checked them out first? First thing I did. I searched all three of them."

"You . . . patted them down?"

"Patted them down? Hell, I strip-searched 'em."

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Ben tried to keep his jaw from gaping. "You're joking."

"I wouldn't joke about four hundred dollars."

"All of them?"

"Well, 'cept Cora."

"Well, thank goodness for—"

"I had my wife do that."

Ben stared at him. "But that's so improper. And probably illegal—"

"Don't be a weenie, Kincaid. They didn't gripe. They wanted to find the money as much as I did. But none of them had it. I'm certain of that. We searched every nook and cranny."

Ben didn't want to hear about it.

"So, super-sleuth, got any ideas?"

"As a matter of fact, yes."

Burris appeared surprised. "Really?"

"Sure. It's simple."

"Do tell."

"The secret is to rule out everything that didn't happen. Once you've done that, there are usually only a few possibilities left. In fact, maybe only one."

"Stop playin' Sherlock Holmes and tell me what happened."

"It is possible, for instance, that one of your employees took the money. But your strip-search would seem to rule that out."

"Tell me what I don't know."

"And it's possible that you pocketed the money yourself, or never laid it down in the first place, to get out of paying a Christmas bonus. But if that were so, you would never have called me in. You might've reported it to your insurance company, but you would never have called me."

"True enough."

"And if it wasn't you, and it wasn't your employees, it could only be a third party."

"But I told you already. No customers went in or out. I wouldn't pass up a chance to make a sale. It's like an instinct. If a customer had been here, I would've noticed."

"Ah," Ben said, raising a finger, "but would you have noticed . . . Santa Claus?"

Burris appeared thunderstruck. It was several seconds before he spoke. "Damnation . . ."

"When I came back from the courthouse this afternoon, a soliciting Santa was on the sidewalk outside your office, which I thought was a rather odd place for him to plant himself."

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"He's been there all day!" Kovack said.

"So here's the Final Jeopardy question, folks: Did he come into the store while you were out on the sidewalk chitchatting?"

Burris didn't seem to have an answer. He glanced at his employees, and each of them shrugged in turn. "I don't know. After a couple of hours of that infernal bell-ringing, it got so's we didn't notice him anymore."

"Well, then . . ."

"Damnation," Burris muttered. "Swindled by Saint Nick."

"Well, Santa's probably strapped for cash this time of year," Ben said. "Must be a capital-intensive business. Buying toy parts. Operating that sweatshop full of elves."

"How are we going to track him down?" Burris asked.

"Well, a description isn't going to do the police a lot of good, is it?" Ben smiled. "Sorry, Burris, but I think you're hosed. I can call the Salvation Army and some of the other charities. But I have a hunch that your man wasn't an officially sanctioned Santa."

"Damnation," Burris repeated. "I just can't believe it."

"Try not to let it get to you," Ben said, doing his best to simulate sympathy. "After all, your employees are the ones who really lost out. One of them, anyway."

"Jiminy Christmas," Burris muttered. "I need a drink."

"I have just the thing," Ben said, as he made his way to the door. "I'll send over some wassail. Lots of it."

Four hours later, just after seven, Cora Anderson locked the door to the pawnshop, picked up her purse, a bag of groceries, and a beat-up Sony camcorder, and walked toward the parking lot. The snow was coming down heavily now. Several inches were on the ground. It was cold, bitterly cold. She wrapped her coat tightly around her, but it barely made a difference. The icy wind chilled her to the core and made her bones feel like brittle porcelain.

She had barely moved three feet down the sidewalk when she saw him peering through the window at her.

Kincaid. Damn. What was he up to?

He was watching from inside the front window of his office, apparently keeping a close eye on the pawnshop. Why?

She tried to rush on by, to pretend she hadn't noticed him, but the sudden burst of speed unbalanced her. She waved her arms, trying to right herself, but her hands were full and there was nothing to hold on to. She crashed down onto the sidewalk, her backside impacting on the powder.

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Ben rushed out from his office. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'll be fine."

"Let me help you up."

"I can do it," she protested, but after several failed attempts, it became clear that she could not. Without saying another word, Ben took her elbow and hoisted her gently to her feet.

She regathered her belongings. "Well, I'll be on my way now."

"You're sure you're all right?"

"I suppose you're worried I might've broken a hip. That's what happens to us old folks, right? Every time we fall, we break a hip."

"I just want to be sure you can make it home. This sidewalk is treacherous. So are the roads. Travel advisories are telling people to stay put." His eyes fell on the camcorder she was cradling. "Going to shoot some footage of the grandkids?"

"I don't have any grandkids. Least none that I see."

"Who are you spending Christmas with?"

"I don't see that that's any of your business."

"Well, I just wondered. Since you've got the camcorder."

"I'm taking it home to fix. That's what I do. I fix things." She held the black instrument up at eye level and began pushing the buttons. Nothing happened. "It don't work, see?"

"Let me help you to your car."

She shrugged him off. "I don't need your help."

Ben stepped back. "Well, be careful anyway."

She brushed past him, stepping cautiously in the snow. "I can take care of myself."

It took her twenty minutes to get her car started. Probably just cold, bitter cold. God knows *she* was. She eventually got the ancient Chevy running, although the engine was making a gasping, wheezing, churning noise that could hardly be described as healthy. Well, she thought quietly, that makes two of us.

She took the Broken Arrow Expressway out of Tulsa. She lived in a ranch-style house out in the country between Broken Arrow and Claremore. It was a good-size house, well worth the long drive to work. Or so it had seemed, anyway, when Harvey was still alive. When Harvey was alive the house always seemed warm, cozy, just the right size. Now it seemed cold, empty, cavernous. She didn't like living there. It wasn't her home anymore.

Harvey.

The memory splashed down like a tear in the ocean, sending out

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ripples, tiny, tiny ripples that stirred for a moment but soon disappeared.

Harvey.

This would be her first Christmas without Harvey.

She took Exit 118 off the highway and began plowing through the dark country roads. The snow was banked higher here and it was denser and slicker. The back of her car weaved back and forth. She cut her speed in half to compensate. Unlike the highways, there were no streetlights here. The only illumination came from her own flickering headlights. The sudden darkness seemed oppressive and terrifying; it made driving a thousand times harder.

Her hands clenched the steering wheel tightly. Her eyes burned down on the road before her, as if tense, fixed concentration would keep her moving. The snow was still falling and her wipers were doing a pathetic job of clearing it. Her visibility decreased with every mile. Why was she doing this? Why did she bother?

She reduced her speed even further. She was barely moving twenty miles an hour. Barely enough to push the Chevy through the snow. But she was afraid to go any faster.

She had traveled more than fifteen miles at this snail's pace when the Chevy finally gave up the ghost. The churning, growling, grunting slowed, then stopped; the wheels spun more and more futilely, and finally the heap was silent. The car did not move.

Cora pounded her fist against the steering wheel. Not here! Not in the middle of nowhere!

She tried the ignition again and again, but it was useless. This car was not moving.

She zipped up her coat and cracked open the car door. The sudden wind thrust the door wide and out of her hands. The bracing, bitter wind chapped her face and sent an icy wake-up call to the marrow of her bones. Her lips parted and she gasped, literally gasped, trying to catch her breath in the brunt of the sudden blast.

She stepped out of the car slowly. She steadied herself, pressing one hand against the frame, and walked back the length of the car. It was pointless to open the hood; the one category of repair she had never mastered was automobiles. She would have to hope someone came by. She continued walking to the back of the car, taking baby steps, letting her feet come to rest gently in the snow.

All at once, her legs disappeared out from under her as if they

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had been cut off at the knees. She tumbled sideways, down into a ditch by the side of the road, and fell face forward into the wet white bramble.

She lay there, not moving, for more than a minute, like a defrocked snow angel. How had this happened? Why was she doing this? Why did she bother?

Eventually, she lifted her head out of the snow. She was freezing now; her face was icy and numb, though not so numb that she didn't realize it was cut and bleeding. I can't get up, she thought to herself. I can't go on. She pressed out with her arms and legs, but nothing happened.

It was a full five minutes before she rose to her hands and knees. She knew if she tried to stand, she would only fall again, so she didn't try. She crawled. She crawled up the steep slope out of the ditch, then she crawled past the length of her car, her fingers becoming blue and increasingly useless. Finally, when she was beside the car and could use it as a brace, she painstakingly pulled herself to her feet and waited.

No cars came. This road was not heavily traveled. Only the handful of residents would use it, and most of them appeared to be following the traffic advisories and staying put. The snow continued to fall, faster and faster with each passing minute. It pelted Cora in the face till she was near insensible, till she could think of nothing but how cold she was, how much she wanted to be warm, to be anyplace, anything, anywhere else.

Fifteen minutes passed before Cora saw another car. Its bright headlights, suddenly illuminating the inky blackness, frightened her, made her cover her eyes. She thought of Bethlehem, of the shining star of Christmas. No, she told herself, this is something else, something far more earthly, far more useful.

She shouted for help, but her delicate voice was drowned out by the howling wind. Taking careful baby steps, she moved to the side of her car, waving her arms wildly for attention.

"Help me!" she cried. "Please help me! I'm so cold! So cold . . ."

The oncoming car whooshed past her. Its wheels flung icy sludge into her face.

"Please help me . . ." Tears mixed with snow and sludge to form a crystalline layer on her face. The car did not stop. Cora watched as it moved steadily down the road, eventually disappearing into the darkness.

Thirty minutes passed before Cora saw another car. She was so cold she could barely move, could barely think. At first she was

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certain the car was going to stop, but it glided past her on the icy country road, weaving erratically on both sides of the road as it passed. In a matter of seconds, it had disappeared into the dark and hazy horizon.

Barely able to move, Cora clawed her way back into her car. She was so cold she didn't think she would ever be warm again, couldn't even remember what it was like. She couldn't wait any longer. She couldn't last any longer.

The realization came to her all at once, like a fully formed, completely reasoned plan. She couldn't wait. Why should she? Who did she think she was waiting for? No one would miss her, except Armand, and who gave a damn about him?

She opened the glove box.

It was still there.

Harvey's service revolver. It looked shiny and polished, despite the fact that no one had touched it in more than a year. She almost laughed, remembering how she had despised the thing, how they had argued because she didn't want it around. He insisted they keep it, for protection's sake. In case of an emergency.

Well, this was the emergency.

She took the gun into her trembling hands and examined it. It seemed to be in working order. She pressed open the cartridge and saw that it was loaded. Good. No muss, no fuss. It would all be over in an instant.

She wasn't sure quite how to go about it. In books, people always held the gun to their temples. But that seemed so risky, so uncertain.

She opened her mouth, and a gust of warm breath fogged the front windshield. She laid the cold barrel of the gun between her chapped lips and closed her eyes.

Knock, knock, knock.

Her eyes opened. What in God's name was that?

Knock, knock, knock.

Could it be—? Yes! Someone was tapping on the window. The glass was so obscured with snow and ice that she couldn't see who it was.

Quickly, she hid the gun in the glove compartment. She knew the windows were frozen and would not roll down, so she opened the door a crack. The wind whistled into the car, bringing with it a soft voice. "Mrs. Anderson?"

It was that lawyer, that kid. Kincaid.

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"Can I help you? You seem to be stuck."

"Where—" Her lips and mouth were so chapped and frozen she found it difficult to speak. "Where . . . did you come from?"

"I just passed you in my car. I didn't see you till I was past, and it took me awhile to stop my car. Sorry. I've been meaning to get new brake pads, but . . ." He paused for a moment. "Why don't you walk with me to my car?"

"I don't know," she said hesitantly. "What are you doing out here?"

"I think you know," Ben said quietly. "If you won't come out, could I come in and talk with you for a moment?"

She shrugged noncommittally. Ben walked to the other side of the car and, with some effort, got in on the passenger side.

Cora lifted her still-icy head. "You've been following me, haven't you?"

Ben nodded. "Since you left the office. But about thirty seconds after we left the highway, my car slid off the side of the road. I had to dig out some boards and wedge them under the wheels before I could get out of a ditch. Took me awhile to catch up to you. I was probably going too fast, which is why I couldn't stop when I finally found you."

"What do you want?"

"I wanted to give you a chance to turn in the money voluntarily."

Cora's chapped lips parted wordlessly.

"I think it would be better that way. Burris need never know. He'll get his money back; that's all he cares about."

"I thought you thought it was Santa. . . ."

Ben smiled. "I just said that to cool Burris off. Another klepto Kris Kringle? Perish the thought."

"But you said—"

"I bumped into that Santa earlier today. He was seriously padded, and the padding was real. I could barely get through that malfunctioning door of Burris's; that Santa would never have made it."

"How did you know it was me?"

"I didn't. But you were the first one back in the store. It had to be one of the employees, and since the money wasn't on their persons, it had to be stashed somewhere. I waited to see who left the shop carrying something that wasn't theirs. You left with a camcorder."

"It didn't work," Cora said feebly.

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"I know," Ben said. "And I suspect that's because you stuck the money in the battery case. Right?"

"I had to pay Armand. He said if I didn't, he'd . . . hurt me."

"Gambling debts?"

She nodded. "I don't know how it started. After Harvey left me, I didn't know what to do with myself. I started going out to that Creek Nation bingo parlor, like some of the other old ladies."

"I know the place," Ben said.

"That led to betting on the horses, out at Blue Bonnet and Remington Park. Then football games. Interstate lotteries. People were always willing to take my money. Or loan me money. Up to a point."

"And you reached the point."

"Yes. The breaking point. And I was going to be broken."

"Surely you could've borrowed money. Friends? Family?"

She looked down at her rigid hands. "Harvey was my family. And my best friend. After he left . . . I was lost. I tried to fool myself, tried to pretend I could occupy myself with roof-fixing and lawn mower repair and never notice the difference. But I did. No matter what I tried, there was a gaping hole inside of me that nothing could fill. It's more than just being without a companion. Losing Harvey was like losing a limb."

Ben hesitated. "Mrs. Anderson . . . I saw the gun. Why?"

She looked away, but didn't answer.

"Do you have anyone to spend Christmas with?"

Her mouth soundlessly mouthed the word no.

"I'm so sorry."

Her chin rose. "Harvey and I always celebrated the holidays in style, you know? We did it big, with all the trimmings. We had pies and eggnog and caramel apples. We decorated with holly and mistletoe and blinking lights. And we made peanut-butter pine cones for the birds and strung cranberries and peanuts and popcorn." Her face brightened faintly. "And we had goose. Always goose. Not a turkey, but a real, honest-to-God goose, like they did in the old days. Anymore, you can hardly even find a goose, and if you do, it'll cost you an arm and a leg. But with Harvey, we always had goose."

The memory faded, and the smile on her face faded with it. "Harvey liked to keep the holidays just the two of us. I did too, for that matter. It was perfect, while there were two of us. But when there's only one . . ."

"No friends? Children?"

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"No. Oh, I have one son, George, but we had a big falling out twenty years ago. Harvey wanted him to be one thing, he wanted to be another. We didn't approve of the girl he wanted to marry. It all seemed very important at the time, but . . ." Her hand lifted slightly, then dropped. "And now I never see him. I hear I have three grandchildren, but I've never seen them. Not even a picture."

"Cora, why don't you call George? Tonight. As soon as you get home."

"We don't talk. He didn't even come for Harvey's funeral. He doesn't want anything to do with me."

"That isn't so."

"How would you know?"

"Believe me, Mrs. Anderson, this is something I know. No matter how bad things may have been in the past, no matter how much your son may act as if he doesn't care about you, he does. I guarantee it. Nothing would make your son happier than being reconciled with his mother. Especially on Christmas." Ben laid his hand gently over hers. "Call him."

"Can't. Don't know his number. Don't know his address. I'm not even sure what state he lives in now."

"Oh." Ben inhaled deeply, and watched the cold air swirl around the car. "Well, let's go to my car and get out of here."

She pressed her hand against her wrinkled forehead. "I don't have the money anymore. I paid off Armand."

"I know. I followed you, remember?"

"I had to do it." Her eyes cast downward. "I suppose you'll want to tell the police about this. And Burris."

"For now, let's just concentrate on getting you warm."

"That would be nice," she said lifelessly. "But it's going to take a lot more than your car heater to get the chill off these bones."

The words seemed to hang in the air between them, suspended, frozen, like everything else in sight. Ben realized how true it was.

"Mrs. Anderson, you shouldn't go home. Not if you're just going to be all alone."

"I've got nowhere else to go."

"That's what you think." He cracked open the car door. "I just hope you like wassail."

"Wassail?" Her head tilted to one side. "What kind of wassail?"

Ben smiled. "Bad wassail."

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"Ben!" Christina stepped through her apartment door and hugged him. "You came after all!"

"Well," Ben said, "just for a minute. I wanted to—" His attention was diverted by the luminescent red and green glow throughout the room. Normally, Christina's apartment was principally a tribute to all things French, but tonight, the season of Christmas gave the rooms a unique, festive glow. Holly branches hung down from the papier-mâché Eiffel Tower. The Parisian travel posters were ornamented with twinkling lights and plastic icicles. And mistletoe was everywhere.

Christina pulled Ben close and whispered in his ear. "Who is this unexpected guest? She showed up an hour and a half ago and said you dropped her off."

"That's Cora Anderson. She works for Burris. She didn't have anyplace to go for Christmas, and since I knew you were having a party . . ."

"Ben! You old softie. Maybe you don't hate Christmas so much after all." She pulled him into the room. "Where have you been?"

"I had to arrange a last-minute delivery. I hope this hasn't been an imposition."

"Not at all. Cora's been keeping us all very entertained, once we got her cleaned up and thawed out. We've been playing games."

They stepped into the living room, and Ben saw Cora slapping her hands and thighs in rhythm with Jones and Loving. "The minister's cat is an . . . amorous cat," Cora said, barely sneaking the word in in time.

Jones was next, speaking while his hands kept up the rhythm. "The minister's cat is an . . . ambidextrous cat."

Loving stared at him. "You made that up."

"I did not and it's your turn."

"But that's cheating."

"It is not. Stop stalling and take your turn."

Loving kept clapping but glared at Jones. "The minister's cat is an angry cat."

Cora laughed. "Perhaps this would be a good time to take a break." She stepped out of the circle and approached Ben. "Thank you for bringing me here. We've been having a lovely time."

"I'm glad," Ben said.

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I suppose you'll want me to turn myself in . . ."

"What, and interrupt your fun? I wouldn't dream of it. By the way, I managed to track down the money. The culprit escaped, but

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I recovered and returned Burris's money, which is all he cares about. So the case is over."

"But—"

"No buts. Get back in the game before Jones and Loving kill each other."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly, then slowly turned away.

The doorbell rang. "Who on earth could that be?" Christina wondered. "I haven't invited anyone else."

On the other side of the door stood a teenage boy wrapped from head to foot in coats and mittens and scarves. And he was holding a gigantic bird. "Sorry I took so long," the kid said. "The weather out there is awful, even on a snow plow."

"What on earth is that?" Christina asked.

"A goose!" Cora cried. She scrambled to the door, moving her spindly limbs more quickly than Ben would have thought possible. "Where did this come from?"

The boy checked his order. "We got a call from—"

"All that matters is that it's here." Ben took the huge bird from the kid, gave him a big tip, and closed the door.

"What on earth am I going to do with a goose?" Christina asked. "I don't know how to cook a goose."

"Leave it to me, dearie." Cora took the huge bird from Ben and hauled it into the kitchen, her eyes wide and contented, humming "Jingle Bells" as she went.

"What a transformation," Christina said. "When she arrived, she looked suicidal. Now look at her."

"She was just having a spot of trouble," Ben said, "and she had nowhere to turn for help."

"It doesn't take much to turn someone's life around," Christina said. "Especially at Christmas."

Ben nodded. Cora had what she needed, for now, anyway. And tomorrow, or the next day, he couldn't be sure when, but soon, she would pick up the phone and call George and see those three grandkids of hers. She'd recover what she had lost. What she needed. What we all need, Ben thought. Perhaps even—

"So where'd you get the goose?" Christina said, interrupting his thoughts.

"Harvey Flickinger, of course. It helps to have a poultry farmer in your debt. He doesn't keep geese, but he knew someone who does. Had it sent right over."

"And how on earth did you square things with Burris?" She gave

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Ben a sharp look, then reached under his coat and withdrew the white envelope. "Only one of the Ben Franklins," she noted.

"Perfect," Ben said. "Just enough to pay for the goose."

Christina replaced the envelope and patted his coat. "Some Scrooge you are."

They walked back to the living room and were immediately accosted by Loving. "Is there such a word as—" he took a deep breath—"beneficent?"

"Well," Ben said, "there's such a word, but you don't often hear it applied to ministers' cats."

"See?" Loving said, poking a finger at Jones.

"This is not a reality game," Jones insisted. "It's a word game."

"Oh, fine. Then maybe I'll make up words, too."

"You couldn't make up a word even if you did know all the letters of the alphabet."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!"

Ben and Christina exchanged a look.

"How about some wassail?" Christina said, interrupting what was left of the game. She poured four glasses and passed them all around. She hesitated before handing one to Ben. "I suppose you'll be going now."

"Oh, I don't know. I thought I might hang around. I've never had goose."

"Really?" Her face lit up like a tree ornament. "Wonderful! I mean—you know, that's . . . good."

"I agree." Ben took the glass from her.

"It's likely to be awhile before dinner is ready."

"Yeah," Jones said. "You sure you won't miss your Trollope novel?"

"I'm sure," he told them. "After all, as a wise woman once said, Christmas is for family. And what is family except people you care about, people you want to be with, who make you feel warm and happy and not so alone? That's what a family is." He stepped into their midst and held his wassail high. "And you're mine. Cheers. And Merry Christmas."

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THE SKY-BLUE BALL

by Joyce Carol Oates

In a long-ago time when I didn't know *Yes I was happy, I was myself and I was happy.* In a long-ago time when I wasn't a child any longer yet wasn't entirely not-a-child. In a long-ago time when I seemed often to be alone, and imagined myself lonely. *Yet this is your truest self: alone, lonely.*

One day I found myself walking beside a high brick wall the color of dried blood, the aged bricks loose and moldering, and over the wall came flying a spherical object so brightly blue I thought it was a bird!—until it dropped a few yards in front of me, bouncing at a crooked angle off the broken sidewalk, and I saw that it was a rubber ball. A child had thrown a rubber ball over the wall, and I was expected to throw it back.

1996 saw the publication of two new novels by Joyce Carol Oates: *First Love* (Ecco Press) in the spring; and *We Were the Mulvaneys,* the story of an American family struggling with its fall from grace, in September. *Foxfire,* a movie based on Ms. Oates's earlier novel by that name, was released in August. †

Hurriedly I let my things fall into the weeds, ran to snatch up the ball, which looked new, smelled new, spongy and resilient in my hand like a rubber ball I'd played with years before as a little girl; a ball I'd loved and had long ago misplaced; a ball I'd loved and had forgotten. "Here it comes!" I called, and tossed the ball back over the wall; I would have walked on except, a few seconds later, there came the ball again, flying back.

A game, I thought. *You can't quit a game.*

So I ran after the ball as it rolled in the road, in the gravelly dirt, and again snatched it up, squeezing it with pleasure, how spongy, how resilient a rubber ball, and again I tossed it over the wall; feeling happiness in swinging my arm as I hadn't done for years since I'd lost interest in such childish games. And this time I

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waited expectantly, and again it came!—the most beautiful sky-blue rubber ball rising high, high into the air above my head and pausing for a heartbeat before it began to fall, to sink, like an object possessed of its own willful volition; so there was plenty of time for me to position myself beneath it and catch it firmly with both hands.

"Got it!"

I was fourteen years old and did not live in this neighborhood, nor anywhere in the town of Strykersville, New York (population 5,600). I lived on a small farm eleven miles to the north and I was brought to Strykersville by school bus, and consequently I was often alone; for this year, ninth grade, was my first at the school and I hadn't made many friends. And though I had relatives in Strykersville these were not relatives close to my family; they were not relatives eager to acknowledge me; for we who still lived in the country, hadn't yet made the inevitable move into town, were perceived inferior to those who lived in town. And, in fact, my family was poorer than our relatives who lived in Strykersville.

At our school teachers referred to the nine farm children bussed there as "North Country children." We were allowed to understand that "North Country children" differed significantly from Strykersville children.

I was not thinking of such things now, I was smiling thinking it must be a particularly playful child on the other side of the wall, a little girl like me; like the little girl I'd been; though the wall was ugly and forbidding with rusted signs EMPIRE MACHINE PARTS and PRIVATE PROPERTY NO TRESPASSING. On the other side of the Chautauqua & Buffalo railroad yard was a street of small, wood-frame houses; it must have been in one of these that the little girl, my invisible playmate, lived. She must be much younger than I was; for fourteen-year-old girls didn't play such heedless games with strangers, we grew up swiftly if our families were not well-to-do.

I threw the ball back over the wall, calling, "Hi! Hi, there!" But there was no reply. I waited; I was standing in broken concrete, amid a scrubby patch of weeds. Insects buzzed and droned around me as if in curiosity, yellow butterflies no larger than my smallest fingernail fluttered and caught in my hair, tickling me. The sun was bright as a nova in a pebbled-white soiled sky that was like a thin chamois cloth about to be lifted away and I thought, *This is the surprise I've been waiting for.* For somehow I had acquired the belief that a surprise, a nice surprise, was waiting for me. I had

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only to merit it, and it would happen. (And if I did not merit it, it would not happen.) Such a surprise could not come from God but only from strangers, by chance.

Another time the sky-blue ball sailed over the wall, after a longer interval of perhaps thirty seconds; and at an unexpected angle as if it had been thrown away from me, from my voice, purposefully. Yet there it came, as if it could not not come: My invisible playmate was obliged to continue the game. I had no hope of catching it but ran blindly into the road (which was partly asphalt and partly gravel and not much traveled except by trucks) and there came a dump truck headed at me, I heard the ugly shriek of brakes and a deafening angry horn and I'd fallen onto my knees, I'd cut my knees that were bare, probably I'd torn my skirt, scrambling quickly to my feet, my cheeks smarting with shame, for wasn't I too grown a girl for such behavior? "Get the hell out of the road!" a man's voice was furious in rectitude, the voice of so many adult men of my acquaintance, you did not question such voices, you did not doubt them, you ran quickly to get out of their way; already I'd snatched up the ball, panting like a dog, trying to hide the ball in my skirt as I turned, shrinking and ducking so the truck driver couldn't see my face, for what if he was someone who knew my father, what if he recognized me, knew my name. But already the truck was thundering past, already I'd been forgotten.

Back then I ran to the wall, though both my knees throbbed with pain, and I was shaking as if shivering, the air had grown cold, a shaft of cloud had pierced the sun. I threw the ball back over the wall again, underhand, so that it rose high, high—so that my invisible playmate would have plenty of time to run and catch it. And so it disappeared behind the wall and I waited, I was breathing hard and did not investigate my bleeding knees, my torn skirt. More clouds pierced the sun and shadows moved swift and certain across the earth like predator fish. After a while I called out hesitantly, "Hi? Hello?" It was like a ringing telephone you answer but no one is there. You wait, you inquire again, shyly, "Hello?" A vein throbbed in my forehead, a tinge of pain glimmered behind my eyes, that warning of pain, of punishment, following excitement. The child had drifted away, I supposed; she'd lost interest in our game, if it was a game. And suddenly it seemed silly and contemptible to me, and sad: There I stood, fourteen years old, a long-limbed weed of a girl, no longer a child yet panting and bleeding from the knees, the palms of my hands, too, chafed and scraped and dirty; there I stood

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alone in front of a moldering brick wall waiting for—what?

It was my school notebook, my several textbooks I'd let fall into the grass and I would afterward discover that my math textbook was muddy, many pages damp and torn; my spiral notebook in which I kept careful notes of the intransigent rules of English grammar and sample sentences diagrammed was soaked in a virulent-smelling chemical and my teacher's laudatory comments in red and my grades of A (for all my grades at Strykersville Junior High were A, of that I was obsessively proud) had become illegible as if they were grades of C, D, F. I should have taken up my books and walked hurriedly away and put the sky-blue ball out of my mind entirely but I was not so free, through my life I've been made to realize that I am not free, as others appear to be free, at all. For the "nice" surprise carries with it the "bad" surprise and the two are so intricately entwined they cannot be separated, nor even defined as separate. So though my head pounded I felt obliged to look for a way over the wall. Though my knees were scraped and bleeding I located a filthy oil drum and shoved it against the wall and climbed shakily up on it, dirtying my hands and arms, my legs, my clothes, even more. And I hauled myself over the wall, and jumped down, a drop of about ten feet, the breath knocked out of me as I landed, the shock of the impact reverberating through me, along my spine, as if I'd been struck a sledgehammer blow to the soles of my feet. At once I saw that there could be no little girl here, the factory yard was surely deserted, about the size of a baseball diamond totally walled in and overgrown with weeds pushing through cracked asphalt, thistles, stunted trees, and clouds of tiny yellow butterflies clustered here in such profusion I was made to see that they were not beautiful creatures, but mere insects, horrible. And rushing at me as if my very breath sucked them at me, sticking against my sweaty face, and in my snarled hair.

Yet stubbornly I searched for the ball. I would not leave without the ball. I seemed to know that the ball must be there, somewhere on the other side of the wall, though the wall would have been insurmountable for a little girl. And at last, after long minutes of searching, in a heat of indignation I discovered the ball in a patch of chicory. It was no longer sky blue but faded and cracked; its dun-colored rubber showed through the venous-cracked surface, like my own ball, years ago. Yet I snatched it up in triumph, and squeezed it, and smelled it—it smelled of nothing: of the earth: of the sweating palm of my own hand. ●

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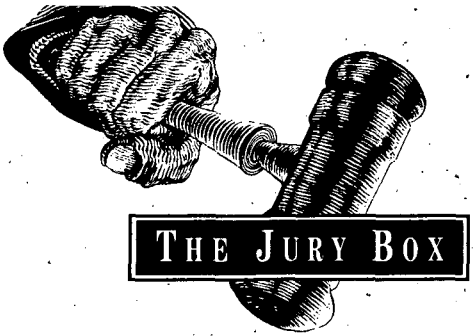

by Jon L. Breen

When I first started reading adult mystery fiction (and *EQMM)* back in the fifties, one of my favorite writers was John F. Suter. Two of his stories were unforgettable for entirely different reasons: "A Break in the Film" (September 1953), for its nostalgic evocation of a silent-era movie theater; and "When Are People Going to Learn?" (September 1954), for its exposure, years before the Kitty Genovese case, of ordinary citizens' shocking failure to act in the face of violent crime. Suter has continued to be one of the very best of crime fiction's pure short-story specialists.

**** John F. Suter: *Old Land, Dark Land, Strange Land,* University of Charleston, 2300 MacCorkle Avenue, SE, Charleston, WV 25304; $21.95. Included with the classics mentioned above are five pastiches of Melville Davisson Post's Uncle Abner, four solid stories about the West Virginia pro-am sleuthing team of Boley and McKee, and eight other non-series tales. Sharyn McCrumb contributes an appreciative introduction, Suter himself an informative preface.

**** Richard T. Chizmar: *Midnight Promises,* Gauntlet Publications, 309 Powell Road, Springfield, PA 19064; $35. Here is a collection from a much younger short story specialist, a highly talented dark suspense writer with a wide range of subject matter and a knack for clear, straightforward, but evocative prose that may remind you of Stephen King, Dean R. Koontz, and Ed Gorman. This 500-copy limited edition, signed by Chizmar, introduction-writer Gorman, and afterword-writer Ray Garton, is a collector's item that should soar in value if Chizmar's future work fulfills the midnight promise. Among many

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gems, I found "Grand Finale" and "The Silence of Sorrow" most powerful and memorable.

**** Jay Brandon: *Defiance County,* Pocket, $23. In what may be the best book yet by one of the most capable of the swelling ranks of lawyer novelists, Kelsey Thatch is assigned as special prosecutor of the District Attorney's brother in a small Texas company town. The charge is double murder of a young couple and kidnapping of their infant daughter. Neither Kelsey nor the reader is sure whether her client is guilty, and the multi-twist solution shows Brandon as adept at fairly laying clues as he is at realistically depicting courtroom combat.

**** Carolyn Wheat: *Mean Streak,* Berkley, $19.95. New York attorney Cass Jameson gets an unexpected assignment: defending her former lover Matt Riordan on Federal bribery charges. Various murders follow, challenging Cass's belief in her client. The fourth Jameson novel is the best to date, deviously plotted and compellingly told with a searching look at legal ethics and interpersonal relationships.

*** Michael Bowen: *Worst Case Scenario,* Crown, $24. The fourth novel about career diplomat Richard Michaelson combines contemporary concerns like the health care crisis and Washington political intrigue; computer technology, and the kind of puzzle-spinning practiced in the Golden Age thirties by writers like John Dickson Carr (yes, Bowen provides a locked-room mystery) and Ellery Queen (he also deals in elaborate wordplay clues). Bowen's wit and literate prose invite further comparison with the masters of an earlier day.

*** John Grisham: *The Runaway Jury,* Doubleday, $26.95. Though hardly anybody seems to think Grisham the best of the current crop of lawyer novelists, he is certainly the best known and most financially successful. In this one, a bestseller as I write and probably still one as you read, incredibly complicated machinations seek to influence the jury in a tobacco company liability trial in Biloxi, Mississippi. The style and characters are no more than serviceable, but the general storytelling, information content, and elaborate plot edifice are wonders to behold.

*** Sandra West Prowell: *When Wallflowers Die,* Walker, $22.95. Montana private eye Phoebe Siegel is asked by a candidate for governor to reopen the investigation of his wife's murder twenty-five years before. The author's smooth and involving narrative shows why she has developed a solid reputation in

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the course of just three books—she is especially good at making the reader feel the winter cold. Like Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone series, the Siegel novels involve the detective's family relationships as well as her professional life, resulting in a tough/cozy hybrid that could as likely win an Agatha from Malice Domestic as a Shamus from Private Eye Writers of America.

*** R. D. Zimmerman: *Tribe,* Dell, $5.50. In another novel that makes effective use of winter weather, former TV reporter Todd Mills is among those chasing around snowy Minneapolis to save a baby from the clutches of a sinister religious cult. He also comes to grips with a mysterious death and other secrets from his closeted college days. Zimmerman manipulates the suspense masterfully. By the evidence of his second appearance, Mills belongs in the company of the most distinguished gay male sleuths in mystery fiction.

*** Janwillem van de Wetering: *The Hollow-Eyed Angel,* Soho, $22. Amsterdam's elderly and soon-to-retire commissaris, who surely is burdened with the most precarious health of any detective in fiction, is asked by a reserve policeman to look into the mysterious death of his book dealer uncle in New York's Central Park. Conveniently, the commissaris is invited to attend a police convention there—and the topics of some of the lectures also handily dovetail with his investigation. Series leads Grijpstra and de Gier are also on the case, in Amsterdam and New York respectively. The author presents his customary intriguing plot, quirky characters, and diverting side issues.

** Thom Racina: *Snow Angel,* Dutton, $23.95. Julia Larson, whose parents have been brutally murdered and whose marriage is heading for the rocks, becomes emotionally involved with her father's business partner, whom the reader knows to be the killer. TV writer Racina has enough narrative gift to keep you reading, but the psychology of the three main characters is unbelievable—for one thing, the two who are supposed to be sympathetic have a remarkable lack of sensitivity toward their seven-year-old daughter. (The Dutton publicists advance this as a first novel, but I remember an earlier Racina hardcover called *The Great Los Angeles Blizzard*—and he also has done some TV novelizations.)

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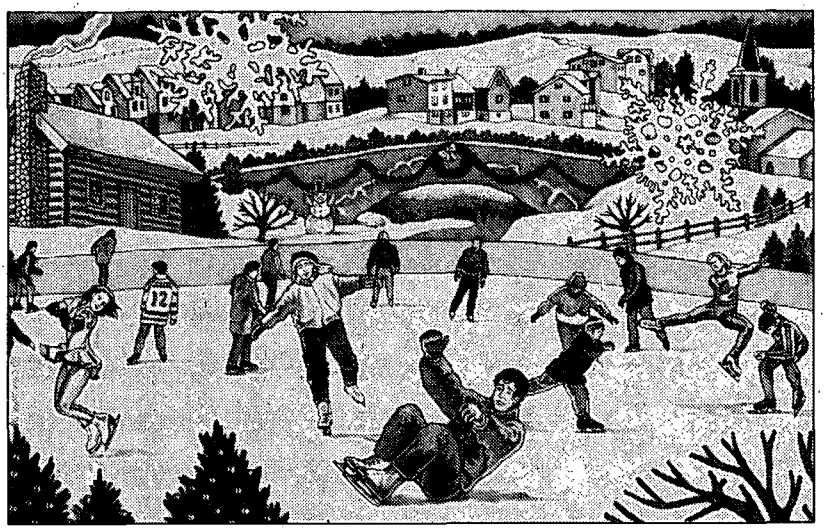

Art by Ron Lhironna

THE CHRISTMAS KITTEN

by Ed Gorman

1.

"She in a good mood?" I said.

The lovely and elegant Pamela Forrest looked up at me as if I'd suggested that there really *was* a Santa Claus.

"Now why would she go and do a foolish thing like that, McCain?" She smiled.

"Oh, I guess because—"

"Because it's the Christmas season, and most people are in good moods?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Well, not our Judge Whitney."

"At least she's consistent," I said.

I had been summoned, as usual, from my law practice, where I'd been working the phones, trying to get my few clients to pay their bills. I had a 1951 Ford ragtop to support. And dreams of taking

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the beautiful Pamela Forrest to see the Platters concert when they were in Des Moines next month.

"You thought any more about the Platters concert?" I said.

"Oh, McCain, now why'd you have to go and bring *that* up?"

"I just thought—"

"You know how much I love the Platters. But I really don't think it's a good idea for the two of us to go out again." She gave me a melancholy little smile. "Now I probably went and ruined your holidays and I'm sorry. You know I like you, Cody, it's just—Stew."

This was Christmas 1959 and I'd been trying since at least Christmas 1957 to get Pamela to go out with me. But we had a problem—while I loved Pamela, Pamela loved Stewart, and Stewart happened to be not only a former football star at the university but also the heir to the town's third biggest fortune.

Her intercom buzzed. "Is he out there pestering you again, Pamela?"

"No, Your Honor."

"Tell him to get his butt in here."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And call my cousin John and tell him I'll be there around three this afternoon."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And remind me to pick up my dry cleaning."

"Yes, Your Honor."

"And tell McCain to get his butt in here. Or did I already say that?"

"You already said that, Your Honor."

I bade goodbye to the lovely and elegant Pamela Forrest and went in to meet my master.

"You know what he did this time?" Judge Eleanor Whitney said three seconds after I crossed her threshold.

The "he" could only refer to one person in the town of Black River Falls, Iowa. And that would be our esteemed chief of police, Cliff Sykes, Jr., who has this terrible habit of arresting people for murders they didn't commit and giving Judge Whitney the pleasure of pointing out the error of his ways.

A little over a hundred years ago, Judge Whitney's family dragged a lot of money out here from the East and founded this town. They pretty much ran it until World War II, a catastrophic event that helped make Cliff Sykes, Sr., a rich and powerful man

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in the local wartime construction business. Sykes, Sr., used his money to put his own members on the town council, just the way the Whitneys had always done. He also started to bribe and coerce the rest of the town into doing things his way. Judge Whitney saw him as a crude outlander, of course. Where her family was conversant with Verdi, Vermeer, and Tolstoy, the Sykes family took as cultural icons Ma and Pa Kettle and Francis the Talking Mule, the same characters I go to see at the drive-in whenever possible.

Anyway, the one bit of town management the Sykes family couldn't get to was Judge Whitney's court. Every time Cliff Sykes, Jr., arrested somebody for murder, the judge called me up and put me to work. In addition to being an attorney, I'm taking extension courses in criminology. The judge thinks this qualifies me as her very own staff private investigator, so whenever she wants something looked into, she calls me. And I'm glad she does. She's my only source of steady income.

"He arrested my cousin John's son, Rick. Charged him with murdering his girlfriend. That stupid ass."

Now in a world of seventh-ton crime-solving geniuses, and lady owners of investigative firms who go two hundred pounds and are as bristly as barbed wire, Judge Eleanor Whitney is actually a small, trim, and very handsome woman. And she knows how to dress herself. Today she wore a brown suede blazer, a crisp button-down, white-collar shirt, and dark fitted slacks. Inside the open collar of the shirt was a green silk scarf that complemented the green of her eyes perfectly.

She was hiked on the edge of the desk, right next to an ample supply of rubber bands.

"Sit down, McCain."

"He didn't do it."

"I said sit down. You know I hate it when you stand."

I sat down.

"He didn't do it," I said.

"Exactly. He didn't do it."

"You know, one of these times you're bound to be wrong. I mean, just by the odds, Sykes is bound to be right."

Which is what I say every time she gives me an assignment.

"Well, he isn't right this time."

Which is what she says every time I say the thing about the odds.

"His girlfriend was Linda Palmer, I take it."

"Right."

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"The one found in her apartment?"

She nodded.

"What's Sykes's evidence?"

"Three neighbors saw Rick running away from the apartment house the night before last."

She launched one of her rubber bands at me, thumb and forefinger style, like a pistol. She likes to see if I'll flinch when the rubber band comes within an eighth of an inch of my ear. I try never to give her that satisfaction.

"He examine Rick's car and clothes?"

"You mean fibers and blood, things like that?"

"Yeah."

She smirked. "You think Sykes would be smart enough to do something like that?"

"I guess you've got a point."

She stood up and started to pace.

You'll note that I am not permitted this luxury, standing and pacing, but for her it is fine. She is, after all, mistress of the universe.

"I just keep thinking of John. The poor guy. He's a very good man."

"I know."

"And it's going to be a pretty bleak Christmas without Rick there. I'll have to invite him out to the house."

Which was not an invitation *I* usually wanted. The judge kept a considerable number of rattlesnakes in glass cages on the first floor of her house. I was always waiting for one of them to get loose.

I stood up. "I'll get right on it." I couldn't recall ever seeing the judge in such a pensive mood. Usually, when she's going to war with Cliff Sykes, Jr., she's positively ecstatic.

But when her cousin was involved, and first cousin at that, I supposed even Judge Whitney—a woman who had buried three husbands, and who frequently golfed with President Eisenhower when he was in the Midwest, and who had been ogled by Khrushchev when he visited a nearby Iowa farm—I supposed even Judge Whitney had her melancholy moments.

She came back to her desk, perched on the edge of it, loaded up another rubber band, and shot it at me.

"Your nerves are getting better, McCain," she said. "You don't twitch as much as you used to."

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"I'll take that as an example of your Christmas cheer," I said. "You noting that I don't twitch as much as I used to, I mean."

Then she glowered at me. "Nail his butt to the wall, McCain. My family's honor is at stake here. Rick's a hothead but he's not a killer. He cares too much about the family name to soil it that way."

Thus basking in the glow of Christmas spirit, not to mention a wee bit of patrician hubris, I took my leave of the handsome Judge Whitney.

2.

Red Ford ragtops can get a little cold around Christmas time. I had everything buttoned down but winter winds still whacked the car every few yards or so.

The city park was filled with snowmen and Christmas angels as Bing Crosby and Perry Como and Johnny Mathis sang holiday songs over the loudspeakers lining the merchant blocks. I could remember being a kid in the holiday concerts in the park. People stood there in the glow of Christmas-tree lights listening to us sing for a good hour. I always kept warm by staring at the girl I had a crush on that particular year. Even back then, I gravitated toward the ones who didn't want me. I guess that's why my favorite holiday song is "Blue Christmas" by Elvis. It's really depressing, which gives it a certain honesty for romantics like myself.

I pulled in the drive of Linda Palmer's apartment house. It was a box with two apartments up, two down. There was a gravel parking lot in the rear. The front door was hung with holly and a plastic bust of Santa Claus.

Inside, in the vestibule area with the mailboxes, I heard Patti Page singing a Christmas song, and I got sentimental about Pamela Forrest again. During one of the times that she'd given up on good old Stewart, she'd gone out with me a few times. The dates hadn't meant much to her, but I looked back on them as the halcyon period of my entire life, when giants walked the earth and you could cut off slices of sunbeams and sell them as gold.

"Hi," I said as soon as the music was turned down and the door opened up.

The young woman who answered the bell to the apartment opposite Linda Palmer's was cute in a dungaree-doll sort of way—ponytail and Pat Boone sweatshirt and jeans rolled up to mid calf. "Hi."

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"My name's McCain."

"I'm Bobbi Thomas. Aren't you Judge Whitney's assistant?"

"Well, sort of."

"So you're here about—"

"Linda Palmer."

"Poor Linda," she said, and made a sad face. "It's scary living here now. I mean, if it can happen to Linda—"

She was about to finish her sentence when two things happened at once. A tiny calico kitten came charging out of her apartment between her legs, and a tall man in a gray uniform with DERBY CLEANERS sewn on his cap walked in and handed her a package wrapped in clear plastic. Inside was a shaggy gray throw rug and a shaggy white one and a shaggy fawn-colored one.

"Appreciate your business, miss," the DERBY man said, and left.

I mostly watched the kitten. She was a sweetie. She walked straight over to the door facing Bobbi's. The card in the slot still read LINDA PALMER.

"You mind picking her up and bringing her in? I just need to put this dry cleaning away."

Ten minutes later, the three of us sat in her living room. I say three because the kitten, who'd been introduced to me as Sophia, sat in my lap and sniffed my coffee cup whenever I raised it to drink. The apartment was small but nicely kept. The floors were oak and not spoiled by wall-to-wall carpeting. She took the throw rugs from the plastic dry-cleaning wrap and spread them in front of the fireplace.

"They get so dirty," she explained as she straightened the rugs, then walked over and sat down.

Then she nodded to the kitten. "We just found her downstairs in the laundry room one day. There's a small TV down there and Linda and I liked to sit down there and smoke cigarettes and drink Cokes and watch *Bandstand*. Do you think Dick Clark's a crook? My boyfriend does." She shrugged. "Ex boyfriend. We broke up." She tried again: "So do you think Dick Clark's a crook?"

A disc jockey named Alan Freed was in trouble with federal authorities for allegedly taking bribes to play certain songs on his radio show. Freed didn't have enough power to make a hit record and people felt he was being used as a scapegoat. On the other hand, Dick Clark *did* have the power to make or break a hit record (Lord, did he, with *American Bandstand* on ninety minutes

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several afternoons a week), but the feds had rather curiously avoided investigating him in any serious way.

"Could be," I said. "But I guess I'd rather talk about Linda."

She looked sad again. "I guess that's why I was talking about Dick Clark. So we wouldn't *have* to talk about Linda."

"I'm sorry."

She sighed. "I just have to get used to it, I guess." Then she looked at Sophia. "Isn't she sweet? We called her our Christmas kitten."

"She sure is."

"That's what I started to tell you. One day Linda and I were downstairs and there Sophia was. Just this little lost kitten. So we both sort of adopted her. We'd leave our doors open so Sophia could just wander back and forth between apartments. Sometimes she slept here, sometimes she slept over there." She raised her eyes from the kitten and looked at me. "He killed her."

"Rick?"

"Uh-huh."

"Why do you say that?"

"Why do I say that? Are you kidding? You should've seen the arguments they had."

"He ever hit her?"

"Not that I know of."

"He ever *threaten* her?"

"All the time."

"You know why?" I said.

"Because he was so jealous of her. He used to sit across the street at night and just watch her front window. He'd sit there for hours."

"Would she be in there at the time?"

"Oh, sure. He always claimed she had this big dating life on the side but she never did."

"Anything special happen lately between them?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"I guess not."

"She gave him back his engagement ring."

"And that—"

"He smashed out her bedroom window with his fist. This was in the middle of the night and he was really drunk. I called the police on him. Just because he's a Whitney doesn't mean he can break the rules anytime he feels like it."

I'd been going to ask her if she was from around here but the

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resentment in her voice about the Whitneys answered my question. The Whitneys had been the valley's most imperious family for a little more than a century now.

"Did the police come?"

"Sykes himself."

"And he did what?"

"Arrested him. Took him in." She gave me a significant look with her deep blue eyes. "He was relishing every minute, too. A Sykes arresting a Whitney, I mean. He was having a blast."

So then I asked her about the night of the murder. We spent twenty minutes on the subject but I didn't learn much. She'd been in her apartment all night watching TV and hadn't heard anything untoward. But when she got up to go to work in the morning and didn't hear Linda moving around in her apartment, she knocked, and, when there wasn't any answer, went in. Linda lay dead, the left side of her head smashed in, sprawled in a white bra and half-slip in front of the fireplace that was just like Bobbi's.

"Maybe I had my TV up too loud," Bobbi said. "I love westerns and it was *Gunsmoke* night. It was a good one, too. But I keep thinking that maybe if I hadn't played the TV so loud, I could've heard her—"

I shook my head. "Don't start doing that to yourself, Bobbi, or it'll never end. If only I'd done this, if only I'd done that. You did everything you could."

She sighed. "I guess you're right."

"Mind one more question?"

She shrugged and smiled. "You can see I've got a pretty busy social calendar."

"I want to try and take Rick out of the picture for a minute. Will you try?"

"You mean as a suspect?"

"Right."

"I'll try."

"All right. Now, who are three people who had something against Linda—or Rick?"

"Why Rick?"

"Because maybe the killer wanted to make it *look* as if Rick did it."

"Oh, I see." Then: "I'd have to say Gwen. Gwen Dawes. She was Rick's former girlfriend. She always blamed Linda for taking him away. You know, they hadn't been going together all that long,

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Rick and Linda, I mean. Gwen would still kind of pick arguments with her when she'd see them in public places."

"Gwen ever come over here and pick an argument?"

"Once, I guess."

"Remember when?"

"Couple months ago, maybe."

"What happened?"

"Nothing much. She and a couple of girlfriends were pretty drunk, and they came up on the front porch and started writing things on the wall. It was juvenile stuff. Most of us graduated from high school two years ago but we're still all kids, if you see what I mean."

I wrote Gwen's name down and said, "Anybody else who bothered Linda?"

"Paul Walters, for sure."

"Paul Walters?"

"*Her* old boyfriend. He used to wait until Rick left at night and then he'd come over and pick a fight with her."

"Would she let him in?"

"Sometimes. Then there was Millie Styles. The wife of the man Linda worked for."

"Why didn't she like Linda?"

"She accused Linda of trying to steal her husband."

"Was she?"

"You had to know Linda."

"I see."

"She wasn't a rip or anything."

"Rip?"

"You know, whore."

"But she—"

"—could be very flirtatious."

"More than flirtatious?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Maybe with Mr. Styles?"

"Maybe. He's an awfully handsome guy. He looks like Fabian."

She wasn't kidding. They weren't very far out of high school.

That was when I felt a scratching on my chin and I looked straight down into the eager, earnest, and heartbreakingly sweet face of Sophia.

"She likes to kiss noses the way Eskimos do," Bobbi said.

We kissed noses.

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Then I set Sophia down and she promptly put a paw in my coffee cup.

"Sophia!" Bobbi said. "She's always putting her paw in wet things. She's obsessed, the little devil."

Sophia paid us no attention. Tail switching, she walked across the coffee table, her left front paw leaving coffee imprints on the surface.

I stood up. "I appreciate this, Bobbi."

"You can save yourself some work."

"How would I do that?"

"There's a skating party tonight. Everybody we've talked about is going to be there." She gave me another one of her significant looks. "Including me."

"Then I guess that's a pretty good reason to go, isn't it?" I said.

"Starts at six-thirty. It'll be very dark by then. You know how to skate?"

I smiled. "I wouldn't exactly call it skating."

"Then what would you call it?"

"Falling down is the term that comes to mind," I said.

3.

Rick Whitney was even harder to love than his aunt.

"When I get out of this place, I'm going to take that hillbilly and push him off Indian Cliff."

In the past five minutes, Rick Whitney, of the long blond locks and relentlessly arrogant blue-eyed good looks, had also threatened to shoot, stab, and set fire to our beloved chief of police, Cliff Sykes, Jr. As an attorney, I wouldn't advise any of my clients to express such thoughts, especially when they were in custody, being held for premeditated murder (or as my doctor friend Stan Greenbaum likes to say, "pre-medicated murder"). "Rick, we're not getting anywhere."

He turned on me again. He'd turned on me three or four times already, pushing his face at me, jabbing his finger at me.

"Do you know what it's like for a Whitney to be in jail? Why, if my grandfather were still alive, he'd come down here and shoot Sykes right on the spot."

"Rick?"

"What?"

"Sit down and shut up."

"You're telling me to shut up?"

"Uh-huh. And to sit down."

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"I don't take orders from people like you."

I stood up. "Fine. Then I'll leave."

He started to say something nasty, but just then a cloud passed over the sun and the six cells on the second floor of the police station got darker.

He said, "I'll sit down."

"And shut up?"

It was a difficult moment for a Whitney. Humility is even tougher for them than having a tooth pulled. "And shut up."

So we sat down, him on the wobbly cot across from my wobbly cot, and we talked as two drunks three cells away pretended they weren't listening to us.

"A Mrs. Mawbry who lives across the street saw you running out to your car about eleven P.M. the night of the murder. Dr. Mattingly puts the time of death at right around that time."

"She's lying."

"You know better than that."

"They just hate me because I'm a Whitney."

It's not easy going through life being of a superior species, especially when all the little people hate you for it.

"You've got fifteen seconds," I said.

"For what?"

"To stop stalling and tell me the truth. You went to the apartment and found her dead, didn't you? And then you ran away."

I watched the faces of the two eavesdropping winos. It was either stay up here in the cells, or use the room downstairs that I was sure Cliff Sykes, Jr., had bugged.

"Ten seconds."

He sighed and said, "Yeah, I found her. But I didn't kill her."

"You sure of that?"

He looked startled. "What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"It means were you drinking that evening, and did you have any sort of alcoholic blackout? You've been known to tip a few."

"I had a couple beers earlier. That was it. No alcoholic blackout."

"All right," I said. "Now tell me the rest of it."

"Wonder if the state'll pass that new law," Chief Cliff Sykes, Jr., said to me as I was leaving the police station by the back door.

"I didn't know that you kept up on the law, Cliff, Jr."

He hated it when I added the Jr. to his name, but since he was about to do a little picking on me, I decided to do a little picking on him. With too much Brylcreem—Cliff, Jr., apparently never

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heard the part of the jingle that goes "A little dab'll do ya"—and his wiry moustache, he looks like a bar rat all duded up for Saturday night. He wears a khaki uniform that Warner Brothers must have rejected for an Errol Flynn western. The epaulets alone must weigh twenty-five pounds each.

"Yep, next year they're goin' to start fryin' convicts instead of hanging them."

The past few years in Iowa, we'd been debating which was the more humane way to shuffle off this mortal coil. At least when the state decides to be the shuffler and make you the shufflee.

"And I'll bet you think that Rick Whitney is going to be one of the first to sit in the electric chair, right?"

He smiled his rat smile, sucked his toothpick a little deeper into his mouth. "You said it, I didn't."

There's a saying around town that money didn't change the Sykes family any—they're still the same mean, stupid, dishonest, and uncouth people they've always been.

"Well, I hate to spoil your fun, Cliff, Jr., but he's going to be out of here by tomorrow night."

He sucked on his toothpick some more. "You and what army is gonna take him out of here?"

"Won't take an army, Cliff, Jr., I'll just find the guilty party and Rick'll walk right out of here."

He shook his head. "He thinks his piss don't stink because he's a Whitney. This time he's wrong."

4.

The way I figure it, any idiot can learn to skate standing up. It takes a lot more creativity and perseverance to skate on your knees and your butt and your back.

I was putting on quite a show. Even five-year-olds were pointing at me and giggling. One of them had an adult face pasted on his tiny body. I wanted to give him the finger but I figured that probably wouldn't look quite right, me being twenty-six and an attorney and all.

Everything looked pretty tonight, gray smoke curling from the big log cabin where people hung out putting on skates and drinking hot cider and warming themselves in front of the fireplace. Christmas music played over the loudspeakers, and every few minutes you'd see a dog come skidding across the ice to meet up with its owners. Tots in snowsuits looking like Martians toddled across the ice in the wake of their parents.

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The skaters seemed to come in four types: the competitive skaters who were just out tonight to hone their skills; the show-offs who kept holding their girlfriends over their heads; the lovers who were melting the ice with their scorching looks; and the junior-high kids who kept trying to knock everybody down accidentally. I guess I should add the seniors; they were the most fun to watch, all gray hair and dignity as they made their way across the ice arm in arm. They probably came here thirty or forty years ago when Model-Ts had lined the parking area, and when the music had been supplied by Rudy Vallee. They were elegant and touching to watch here on the skating rink tonight.

I stayed to the outside of the rink. I kept moving because it was at most ten above zero. Falling down kept me pretty warm, too.

I was just getting up from a spill when I saw a Levi'd leg—two Levi'd legs—standing behind me. My eyes followed the line of legs upwards and there she was. It was sort of like a dream, actually, a slightly painful one because I'd dreamt it so often and so uselessly.

There stood the beautiful and elegant Pamela Forrest. In her white woolen beret, red cable-knit sweater, and jeans, she was the embodiment of every silly and precious holiday feeling. She was even smiling.

"Well, I'm sure glad you're here," she said.

"You mean because you want to go out?"

"No, I mean because I'm glad there's somebody who's even a worse skater than I am."

"Oh," I said.

She put out a hand and helped me up. I brushed the flesh of her arm—and let my nostrils be filled with the scent of her perfume—and I got so weak momentarily I was afraid I was going to fall right back down.

"You have a date?"

I shook my head. "Still doing some work for Judge Whitney."

She gave my arm a squeeze. "Just between you and me, McCain, I hope you solve one of these cases yourself someday."

She was referring to the fact that in every case I'd worked on, Judge Whitney always seemed to solve it just as I was starting to figure out who the actual culprit was. I had a feeling, though, that this case I'd figure out all by my lonesome.

"I don't think I've ever seen Judge Whitney as upset as she was today," I said.

"I'm worried about her. This thing with Rick, I mean. It isn't

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just going up against the Sykes family this time. The family honor's at stake."

I looked at her. "You have a date?"

And then she looked sad, and I knew what her answer was going to be.

"Not exactly."

"Ah. But Stewart's going to be here."

"I think so. I'm told he comes here sometimes."

"Boy, you're just as pathetic as I am."

"Well, that's a nice thing to say."

"You can't have him any more than I can have you. But neither one of us can give it up, can we?"

I took her arm and we skated. We actually did a lot better as a team than we did individually. I was going to mention that to her but I figured she would think I was just being corny and coming on to her in my usual clumsy way. If only I were as slick as Elvis in those movies of his where he sings a couple of songs and beats the crap out of every bad guy in town, working in a few lip locks with nubile females in the interim.

I didn't recognize them at first. Their skating costumes, so dark and tight and severe, gave them the aspect of Russian ballet artists. People whispered at them as they soared past, and it was whispers they wanted.

David and Millie Styles were the town's "artistic fugitives," as one of the purpler of the paper's writers wrote once. Twice a year they ventured to New York to bring radical new items back to their interior decorating "salon," as they called it, and they usually brought back a lot of even more radical attitudes and poses. Millie had once been quoted in the paper as saying that we should have an "All Nude Day" twice a year in town; and David was always standing on the library steps waving copies of banned books in the air and demanding that they be returned to library shelves. The thing was, I agreed with the message, it was the messengers I didn't care for. They were wealthy, attractive dabblers who loved to outrage and shock. In a big city, nobody would've paid them any attention. Out here, they were celebrities.

"God, they look great, don't they?" Pamela said.

"If you like the style."

"Skin-tight, all-black skating outfits. Who else would've thought of something like that?"

"You look a lot better."

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She favored me with a forehead kiss. "Oh God, McCain, I sure wish I could fall in love with you."

"I wish you could, too."

"But the heart has its own logic."

"That sounds familiar."

"Peyton Place."

"That's right."

Peyton Place had swept through town two years ago like an army bent on destroying everything in its path. The fundamentalists not only tried to get it out of the library, they tried to ban its sale in paperback. The town literary lions, such as the Styleses, were strangely moot. They did not want to be seen defending something as plebeian as Grace Metalious's book. I was in a minority. I not only liked it, I thought it was a good book. A true one, as Hemingway often said.

On the far side of the rink, I saw David Styles skate away from his wife and head for the warming cabin.

She skated on alone.

"Excuse me. I'll be back," I said.

It took me two spills and three near-spills to reach Millie Styles.

"Evening," I said.

"Oh," she said, staring at me. "You." Apparently I looked like something her dog had just dragged in from the backyard. Something not quite dead yet.

"I wondered if we could talk."

"What in God's name would you and I have to talk about, McCain?"

"Why you killed Linda Palmer the other night."

She tried to slap me but fortunately I was going into one of my periodic dives so her slap missed me by half a foot.

I did reach out and grab her arm to steady myself, however.

"Leave me alone," she said.

"Did you find out that Linda and David were sleeping together?"

From the look in her eyes, I could see that she had. I kept thinking about what Bobbi Thomas had said, how Linda was flirtatious.

And for the first time, I felt something human for the striking if not quite pretty woman wearing too much makeup and way too many New York poses. Pain showed in her eyes. I actually felt a smidge of pity for her.

Her husband appeared magically. "Is something wrong?" Seeing the hurt in his wife's eyes, he had only scorn for me. He put a ten-

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der arm around her. "You get the hell out of here, McCain." He sounded almost paternal, he was so protective of her.

"And leave me alone," she said again, and skated away so quickly that there was no way I could possibly catch her.

Then Pamela was there again, sliding her arm through mine.

"You have to help me, McCain," she said.

"Help you what?"

"Help me look like I'm having a wonderful time."

Then I saw Stew McGinley, former college football star and idle rich boy, skating around the rink with his girlfriend, the relentlessly cheery and relentlessly gorgeous Cindy Parkhurst, who had been a cheerleader at State the same year Stew was All Big-Eight.

This was the eternal triangle: I was in love with Pamela; Pamela was in love with Stew; and Stew was in love with Cindy, who not only came from the same class—right below the Whitneys—but had even more money than Stew did, and not only that but had twice done the unthinkable. She'd broken up with Stew and started dating somebody else. This was something Stew wasn't used to. *He* was supposed to do the breaking up. Stew was hooked, he was.

They were both dressed in white costumes tonight, and looked as if they would soon be on *The Ed Sullivan Show* for no other reason than simply existing.

"I guess I don't know how to do that," I said.

"How to do what?"

"How to help you look like you're having a wonderful time."

"I'm going to say something and then you throw your head back and break out laughing." She looked at me. "Ready?"

"Ready."

She said something I couldn't hear and then I threw my head back and pantomimed laughing.

I had the sense that I actually did it pretty well—after watching all those Tony Curtis movies at the drive-in, I was bound to pick up at least a few pointers about acting—but the whole thing was moot because Stew and Cindy were gazing into each other's eyes and paying no attention to us whatsoever.

"There goes my Academy Award," I said.

We tried skating again, both of us wobbling and waffling along, when I saw Paul Walters standing by the warming house smoking a cigarette. He was apparently one of those guys who didn't skate but liked to come to the rink and look at all the participants so he

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could feel superior to them. A sissy sport, I could hear him thinking.

"I'll be back," I said.

By the time I got to the warming house, Paul Walters had been joined by Gwen Dawes. Just as Paul was the dead girl's old boyfriend, Gwen was the suspect's old girlfriend. Those little towns in Kentucky where sisters marry brothers had nothing on our own cozy little community.

Just as I reached them, Gwen, an appealing if slightly overweight redhead, pulled Paul's face down to hers and kissed him. He kissed her right back.

"Hi," I said, as they started to separate.

They both looked at me as if I had just dropped down from a UFO.

"Oh, you're Cody McCain," Walters said. He was tall, sinewy, and wore the official uniform of juvenile delinquents everywhere—leather jacket, jeans, engineering boots. He put his Elvis sneer on right after he brushed his teeth in the morning.

"Right. I wondered if we could maybe talk a little."

" 'We'?" he said.

"Yeah. The three of us."

"About what?"

I looked around. I didn't want eavesdroppers.

"About Linda Palmer."

"My one night off a week and I have to put up with this crap," he said.

"She was a bitch," Gwen Dawes said.

"Hey, c'mon, she's dead," Walters said.

"Yeah, and that's just what she deserved, too."

"You wouldn't happened to have killed her, would you, Gwen?" I said.

"That's why he's here, Paul. He thinks we did it."

"Right now," I said, "I'd be more inclined to say *you* did it."

"He works for Whitney," Walters said. "I forgot that. He's some kind of investigator."

She said, "He's trying to prove that Rick didn't kill her. That's why he's here."

"You two can account for yourselves between the hours of ten and midnight the night of the murder?"

Gwen eased her arm around his waist. "I sure can. He was at my place."

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I looked right at her. "He just said this was his only night off. Where do you work, Paul?"

Now that I'd caught them in a lie, he'd lost some of his poise.

"Over at the tire factory."

"You were there the night of the murder?"

"I was—sick."

I watched his face.

"Were you with Gwen?"

"No—I was just riding around."

"And maybe stopped over at Linda's the way you sometimes did?"

He looked at Gwen then back at me.

"No, I—I was just riding around."

He was as bad a liar as Gwen was.

"And I was home," Gwen said, "in case you're interested."

"Nobody with you?"

She gave Walters another squeeze.

"The only person I want with me is Paul."

She took his hand, held it tight. She was protecting him the way Mr. Styles had just protected Mrs. Styles. And as I watched her now, it gave me an idea about how I could smoke out the real killer. I wouldn't go directly for the killer—I'd go for the protector.

"Excuse us," Gwen said, and pushed past me, tugging Paul along in her wake.

I spent the next few minutes looking for Pamela. I finally found her sitting over in the empty bleachers that are used for speed-skating fans every Sunday when the ice is hard enough for competition.

"You okay?"

She looked up at me with those eyes and I nearly went over backwards. She has that effect on me, much as I sometimes wished she didn't.

"You know something, McCain?" she said.

"What?"

"There's a good chance that Stew is never going to change his mind and fall in love with me."

"And there's a good chance that *you're* never going to change *your* mind and fall in love with *me.*"

"Oh, McCain," she said, and stood up, the whole lithe, elegant length of her. She slipped her arm in mine again and said, "Let's not talk anymore, all right? Let's just skate."

And skate we did.

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5.

When I got home that night, I called Judge Whitney and told her everything I'd learned, from my meeting with Bobbi Thomas to meeting the two couples at the ice rink tonight.

As usual, she made me go over everything to the point that it got irritating. I pictured her on the other end of the phone, sitting there in her dressing gown and shooting rubber bands at an imaginary me across from her.

"Get some rest, McCain," she said. "You sound like you need it."

It was true. I was tired and I probably sounded tired. I tried watching TV. *Mike Hammer* was on at 10:30. I buy all the Mickey Spillane books as soon as they come out. I think Darren McGavin does a great job with Hammer. But tonight the show couldn't quite hold my interest.

I kept thinking about my plan—

What if I actually went through with it?

If the judge found out, she'd probably say it was corny, like something out of a Miss Marple movie. (The only mysteries the judge likes are by Rex Stout and Margery Allingham.)

But so what if it was corny—if it turned up the actual culprit?

I spent the next two hours sitting at my desk in my underwear typing up notes.

Some of them were too cute, some of them were too long, some of them didn't make a hell of a lot of sense.

Finally, I settled on:

> If you really love you-know-who, then you'll meet me in Linda Palmer's apt. tonight at 9:00 o'clock.
>
> A Friend

Then I addressed two envelopes, one to David Styles and one to Gwen Dawes, for delivery tomorrow.

I figured that they each suspected their mates of committing the murder, and therefore whoever showed up tomorrow night had to answer some hard questions.

It was going to feel good, to actually beat Judge Whitney to the solution of a murder. I mean, I don't have that big an ego, I really don't, but I'd worked on ten cases for her now, and she'd solved each one.

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6.

I dropped off the notes in the proper mailboxes before going to work, then I spent the remainder of the day calling clients to remind them that they, ahem, owed me money. They had a lot of wonderful excuses for not paying me. Several of them could have great careers as science fiction novelists if they'd only give it half a chance.

I called Pamela three times, pretending I wanted to speak to Judge Whitney.

"She wrapped up court early this morning," Pamela told me on the second call. "Since then, she's been barricaded in her chambers. She sent me out the first time for lunch—a ham-and-cheese on rye with very hot mustard—and the second time for rubber bands. She ran out."

"Why doesn't she just pick them up off the floor?"

"She doesn't like to reuse them."

"Ah."

"Says it's not the same."

After work, I stopped by the A&W for a burger, fries, and root-beer float. Another well-balanced Cody McCain meal.

Dusk was purple and lingering and chill, clear pure Midwestern stars suddenly filling the sky.

Before breaking the seal and the lock on Linda Palmer's door, I went over and said hello to Bobbi Thomas.

She came to the door with the kitten in her arms. She wore a white sweater that I found it difficult to keep my eyes off of, and a pair of dark slacks.

"Oh, hi, Cody."

"Hi."

She raised one of the kitten's paws and waggled it at me. "She says 'hi' too."

"Hi, honey." I nodded to the door behind me. "Can I trust you?"

"Sure, Cody. What's up?"

"I'm going to break into Linda's apartment."

"You're kidding."

"You'll probably hear some noises—people in the hallway and stuff—but please don't call the police. All right?"

For the first time, she looked uncertain. "Couldn't we get in trouble?"

"I suppose."

"And aren't you an officer of the court or whatever you call it?"

"Yeah," I said guiltily.

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"Then maybe you shouldn't—"

"I want to catch the killer, Bobbi, and this is the only way I'll do it."

"Well—" she started to say.

Her phone rang behind her. "I guess I'd better get that, Cody."

"Just don't call the police."

She looked at me a long moment. "Okay, Cody. I just hope we don't get into any trouble."

She took herself, her kitten, and her wonderful sweater back inside her apartment.

7.

I kind of felt like Alan Ladd.

I saw a great crime movie once where he was sitting in the shadowy apartment of the woman who'd betrayed him. You know how a scene like that works. There's this lonely wailing sax music and Alan is smoking one butt after another (no wonder he was so short, probably stunted his growth smoking back when he was in junior high or something), and you could just feel how terrible and empty and sad he felt.

Here I was sitting in an armchair, smoking one Pall Mall after another, and if I wasn't feeling quite terrible and empty, I was at least feeling sort of sorry for myself. It was way past time that I show the judge that I could figure out one of these cases for myself.

When the knock came, it startled me, and for the first time I felt self-conscious about what I was doing.

I'd tricked four people into coming here without having any proof that any of them had had anything to do with Linda Palmer's murder at all. What would happen when I opened the door and actually faced them?

I was about to find out.

Leaving the lights off, I walked over to the door, eased it open, and stared into the faces of David and Millie Styles. They both wore black—black turtlenecks; a black peacoat for him; a black suede car coat for her; and black slacks for both of them—and they both looked extremely unhappy.

"Come in and sit down," I said.

They exchanged disgusted looks and followed me into the apartment.

"Take a seat," I said.

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"I just want to find out why you sent us that ridiculous note," David Styles said.

"If it's so ridiculous, why did you come here?" I said.

As he looked at his wife again, I heard a knock on the back door. I walked through the shadowy apartment—somehow, I felt that lights-out would be more conducive to the killer blubbering a confession—and peeked out through the curtains near the stove: Gwen and Paul, neither of them looking happy.

I unlocked the door and let them in.

Before I could say anything, Gwen glared at me. "I'll swear under oath that Paul was with me the whole time the night she was murdered."

Suspects in Order of Likelihood

1. Millie
2. Gwen
3. David
4. Paul

That was before Gwen had offered herself as an alibi. Now Paul went to number one, with her right behind.

I followed them into the living room, where the Styleses were still standing.

I went over to the fireplace and leaned on the mantel and said, "One of us in this room is a murderer."

Millie Styles snorted. "This is just like a Charlie Chan movie."

"I'm serious," I said.

"So am I," she said.

"Each of you had a good reason to kill Linda Palmer," I said.

"I didn't," David Styles said.

"Neither did I," said Paul.

I moved away from the mantel, starting to walk around the room, but never taking my eyes off them.

"You could save all of us a lot of time and trouble by just confessing," I said.

"Which one of us are you talking to?" Gwen said. "I can't see your eyes in the dark."

"I'm talking to the real killer," I said.

"Maybe you killed her," David Styles said, "and you're trying to frame one of us."

This was pretty much how it went for the next fifteen minutes, me getting closer and closer to the real killer, making him or her

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really sweat it out, while I continued to pace and throw out accusations.

I guess the thing that spoiled it was the blood-red splash of light in the front window, Cliff Sykes, Jr.'s, personal patrol car pulling up to the curb, and then Cliff Sykes, Jr., racing out of his car, gun drawn.

I heard him on the porch, I heard him in the hall, I heard him at the door across the hall.

Moments after the door opened, Bobbi Thomas wailed, "All right! I killed her! I killed her! I caught her sleeping with my boyfriend!"

I opened the door and looked out into the hall.

Judge Whitney stood next to Cliff Sykes, Jr., and said, "There's your killer, Sykes. Now you get down to that jail and let my nephew go!"

And with that, she turned and stalked out of the apartment house.

Then I noticed the Christmas kitten in Bobbi Thomas's arms. "What's gonna happen to the kitty if I go to prison?" she sobbed.

"Probably put her to sleep," the ever-sensitive Cliff Sykes, Jr., said.

At which point, Bobbi Thomas became semihysterical.

"I'll take her, Bobbi," I said, and reached over and picked up the kitten.

"Thanks," Bobbi said over her shoulder as Sykes led her out to his car.

Each of the people in Linda Palmer's apartment took a turn at glowering at me as he walked into the hall and out the front door.

"See you, Miss Marple," said David Styles.

"So long, Sherlock," smirked Gwen Dawes.

Her boyfriend said something that I can't repeat here.

And Millie Styles said, "Charlie Chan does it a lot better, McCain."

When Sophie (I'm an informal kind of guy, and Sophia is a very formal kind of name) and I got back to my little apartment over a store that Jesse James had actually shot up one time, we both got a surprise.

A Christmas tree stood in the corner resplendent with green and yellow and red lights, and long shining strands of silver icing, and a sweet little angel right at the very tip-top of the tree.

And next to the tree stood the beautiful and elegant Pamela

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Forrest, gorgeous in a red sweater and jeans. Now, in the Shell Scott novels I read, Pamela would be completely naked and beckoning to me with a curling, seductive finger.

But I was happy to see her just as she was.

"Judge Whitney was afraid you'd be kind of down about not solving the case, so she asked me to buy you a tree and set it up for you."

"Yeah," I said. "I didn't even have Bobbi on my list of suspects. How'd she figure it out anyway?"

Pamela immediately lifted Sophie from my arms and started doing Eskimo noses with her. "Well, first of all, she called the cleaners and asked if any of the rugs that Bobbi had had cleaned had had red stains on it—blood, in other words, meaning that she'd probably killed Linda in her apartment and then dragged her back across to Linda's apartment. The blood came from Sophia's paws most likely, when she walked on the white throw rug." She paused long enough to do some more Eskimo nosing. "Then second, Bobbi told you that she'd stayed home and watched *Gunsmoke*. But *Gunsmoke* had been preempted for a Christmas special and wasn't on that night. And third—" By now she was rocking Sophie in the cradle of her arm. "Third, she found out that the boyfriend that Bobbi had only mentioned briefly to you had fallen under Linda's spell. Bobbi came home and actually found them in bed together—he hadn't even been gentleman enough to take it across the hall to Linda's apartment." Then: "Gosh, McCain, this is one of the cutest little kittens I've ever seen."

"Makes me wish I was a kitten," I said. "Or Sherlock Holmes. She sure figured it out, didn't she?"

Pamela carried Sophie over to me and said, "I think your daddy needs a kiss, young lady."

And I have to admit, it was pretty nice at that moment, Pamela Forrest in my apartment for the very first time, and Sophie's sweet little sandpaper tongue giving me a lot of sweet little kitty kisses. ●

ON OUR COVER: For this special Christmas issue artist Fred Lynch has created caricatures of five of this month's contributors. If you haven't recognized them all, don't worry; their identities are not to be left a mystery. From left to right, Santa's helpers are: Ed Gorman, Joyce Carol Oates, Simon Brett, Edward D. Hoch, and Carolyn G. Hart.

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DAGGER MONEY

by Edward D. Hoch

Ben Snow discovered what passing his fortieth birthday really meant when a punk kid managed to outdraw him in an Arizona cantina where he was having breakfast one balmy spring morning. He shot the pistol out of Ben's hand and dared him to pick it up.

"I don't need a gun for the likes of you," Ben told him, trying to rub the sting out of his fingers.

"So you're the great Ben Snow!" the kid gloated. He was probably no more than nineteen, the age at which Ben had become a gunfighter. But this was 1899, and Ben had thought those days were past. They were, in most of the states. Here in the territories, though, things could still get rough. "I outdrew you fair and square!"

Ben glanced at the gun on the floor. He could never reach it in time, and it might have been damaged by the bullet anyhow. He'd have to use his fists now. "Put down the gun and we'll settle this man-to-man," he said, starting for the kid.

"One step closer and I'll drop you, Snow!"

"No, you won't," Ben said, and kept on coming while the other diners scattered out of the way. He was too close now for the kid to fire without looking foolish. Instead, the weapon came up to pistol-whip Ben across the face. That was what he'd been hoping for. He grabbed the kid's arm, yanking him off balance across his hip, and propelled him through the front window of the cantina. Surprisingly, a cheer went up from the other customers.

"The distinction of almost every Hoch story about a continuing character is its fair-play detective element," Francis M. Nevins said in his introduction to Mr. Hoch's collection *The Night My Friend*. The author drops clues readers can use, if they are sharp enough, to find the solution to the mystery themselves. Can you finger the culprit before Ben Snow?

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Ben walked outside and told the kid, "That was a dumb move. You should have shot me in the leg." He went back inside, retrieved his pistol, and sat down.

One man especially, a bit older and huskier than Ben, with hair and a short beard showing flecks of gray, slapped him on the back. "That was a brave tactic. He might have killed you."

Ben shook his head. "Not when I was that close. There's a sort of code among gunfighters, or there used to be."

"I'm Roy Hark," the bearded man said, holding out a firm hand which Ben accepted.

"Ben Snow."

"I'd suggest you get moving before he recovers and decides he wants to mix it up some more."

"Good idea," Ben agreed. His horse Oats was tied up outside. He paid for his breakfast and headed out with only a sideways glance at the kid, who still lay in the tangle of dust and broken glass beneath the cantina's window.

Roy Hark mounted up and rode out of town after him, catching him before Ben had ridden more than a hundred yards. "I'm heading your way," he said. "Mind if we ride together?"

"Fine by me."

"Why'd that kid go after you back there? Near as I could tell, you were minding your own business eating breakfast."

"I used to have a reputation as a fast draw. Sometimes a youngster recognizes me and thinks he can beat me to it."

Roy Hark chuckled. "That one did."

"Yeah," Ben said with a sigh. "Not as young as I used to be. Where you going?"

"Circuit riding. I'm a judge in the territory."

"No fooling? Arizona is still a rough place for law and order."

"It is indeed," Judge Hark agreed. "I could use a man like you."

"For what?" Ben asked suspiciously.

"A bodyguard. I have dagger money."

"What's that?"

The judge chuckled. "A very old English phrase. Judges on the Northern Circuit over there were once paid extra money for the purchase of weapons to protect themselves from thieves and robbers on the trail. It was called dagger money. It's not called that in the Arizona Territory, but its purpose is the same. I can hire you to ride with me."

"You saw that punk kid outdraw me. He could have killed me with that shot."

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"But he didn't, and you sent him sailing through the front window. I think you can protect yourself, Mr. Snow, and I'd like you to protect me. That is, if you're free for the next few weeks."

"I've got a cowhand's job waiting for me in a month's time. Until then I'm free. I'm afraid that kid's bullet ruined the cylinder on my pistol, though. I have a spare but I feel better with two."

"We'll stop at the first town with a gunsmith and I'll buy you a new one if it can't be fixed. Depending on how many cases I have to hear, I should complete the circuit in about three weeks' time."

That was how Ben Snow came to meet Judge Roy Hark in the spring of 1899, in the Arizona Territory.

In the first two towns on the circuit the crimes were minor and Judge Hark was able to get through all the cases with only a single day in each place. Ben sat in a back row of the courtroom doing his job, listening to the drone of witnesses and would-be lawyers while keeping an eye out for troublemakers. In the second town there was not even the semblance of a courtroom and the trials were held in the local tavern prior to regular drinking hours.

"How long have you been doing this?" Ben asked as they rode out of town the following morning.

"Just two years in the territory. I was back East in St. Louis before that."

"Did you use your dagger money before?"

"Nope. Never thought I needed it till my last circuit through here, when a fellow took a shot at me after I sent his brother to jail. Nicked me in the calf of my left leg and I decided I needed protection after that. Got a wife and son in Phoenix and they worry about me. I promised I'd find somebody to ride with me, but you were the first likely person who came along."

"Glad I did. It's easy work."

The circuit ran north through Chino Valley and the Dead Horse Ranch, then turned northwest toward Ash Fork. They'd hoped to make it that far by nightfall, but it was not to be. The judge's horse stepped in a gopher hole and came up lame that afternoon. Ben examined the leg and hoof but there was no serious damage. "You'd better walk him for a while. He should be fine by morning."

They'd walked on for about a half-mile, leading both horses through occasional stands of cottonwood trees, when Oats suddenly lifted his head and whinnied. Ben glanced quickly around, seeking the reason for his emotion. Off in the distance, perhaps fifty yards away, stood a closed wagon with a pair of horses har-

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nessed to it, the sort that peddlers and medicine shows used for travel.

"We should see if they need help," Judge Hark suggested. "If they were camping they wouldn't have the horses hitched up." They moved through the sparse vegetation toward the wagon, and as they drew closer Ben could read the sign painted on its side: Myers & Carlotta—Traveling Vaudeville.

"Hello!" Ben called out. "Anyone there?"

Judge Hark went around to the front of the wagon and peered inside. There was no one in the driver's seat and he boosted himself up for a look into the rear.

"My God!"

"What is it?" Ben asked, hurrying to join him.

Hark pointed inside. "I think they're dead."

Ben climbed up for a look and nodded. The traveling vaudevillians were slumped in the back amidst their costumes and props, covered with blood. It appeared they had been stabbed or hacked to death with knives.

"Apaches?" Judge Hark asked.

Ben Snow shook his head. "There's been no Apache trouble in these parts since Geronimo, and that was thirteen years ago. More likely it was highwaymen."

"What would they expect to find in this out-of-the-way place?"

"They might have been fleeing from a bank robbery, something like that," Ben suggested. "The bodies are still warm. They haven't been dead long." He stood up, using the height of the wagon to help him see in all directions. "The killers might be coming back for the horses."

"What are those knives that were used on them? They have no cross guards."

Ben leaned into the back of the wagon to pick one up. "Balanced throwing knives. They probably did knife-throwing in their act. There's no real edge to them. That's why the killer or killers had to keep stabbing several times."

Roy Hark jumped down to the ground. "We can't leave the horses here like this."

"I saw something off to the west when I was peering around up there. It looked like a small cluster of cabins on a little hill. We'd better go tell them."

"Maybe that's where the killers came from."

"We'll take our chances. Unharness the horses and we'll lead them in with ours."

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The judge took orders quite well, Ben decided with a smile. With the horses in tow they set off toward the cabins he'd spotted. When they were near enough, Ben could see there were four cabins in all, standing at the top of a small hill. A single weathered outhouse seemed to serve them all. He motioned the judge to fall back a little, putting the horses in front. "Just in case someone tries a shot with a rifle," he said.

But no one did. They were up to the nearest cabin before they saw anyone at all, and then it was a young woman coming up the hill from the opposite direction carrying two buckets of water. She jerked in surprise when she saw them with the horses, spilling a splash of water from each bucket. "What is this? Who are you?"

She had dark hair and a pretty face, and when she spoke there was a trace of a Mexican accent in her words.

"I'm Judge Roy Hark, the circuit rider in these parts. This is my traveling companion, Mr. Ben Snow. We were passing this way when we came upon the bodies of two traveling vaudevillians in a wagon down yonder. They died violently, I'm afraid. Do you know anything about it?"

"Violently? You mean the Apaches—"

"We don't think so. They've been pretty peaceful on their reservations lately. Have you seen any strangers about? Highwaymen? Mexican bandits?"

She shook her head. "Nothing like that."

A young blond man carrying a rifle had emerged from the nearest cabin. "What is it, Louella?"

Judge Hark introduced them and told of their discovery of the bodies. "Did you see those people?"

"They came up here and talked to us," the man said. "They were camping down there for a few days." He ushered them into the cabin. "You can see we had no room to put them up here—just a parlor and one bedroom, with a root cellar down below." The furnishings were drab and rustic, with a feed-store calendar nailed to the wall on top of three or four previous ones.

"We saw your cabins and brought the horses up here. The bodies are still warm. They haven't been dead long and the killers could still be in the area."

"Let's put these horses in the corral around back and I'll go down to have a look," the young man said grimly. "I'm George Fox and this is my wife Louella."

They went back outside and one of the horses from the wagon nuzzled Fox until he gave it a sugar cube.

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"I didn't see any livestock other than your horses," Ben commented as they walked down the hill toward the wagon. "Can't be much land for farming around here."

"We do what we can. Sometimes we pan a little gold from the stream out back, but it's never enough." For Ben that explained why four log cabins had been erected in the middle of nowhere, nearly a half-mile from the nearest stand of trees to supply the lumber. Gold, or the promise of gold, could move mountains.

They reached the wagon and George Fox lifted himself up to view the bodies. He looked inside and immediately pulled back. "Is this a joke? There are no bodies here!"

Ben climbed up to look for himself, but it was true. Though the blood remained, the bodies of Myers and Carlotta had disappeared.

"Maybe they weren't dead after all," Louella suggested.

"They were dead," Judge Hark insisted. "I know a couple of dead bodies when I see them."

Ben was quick to agree. "No doubt about it. The killer returned while we were up at your cabin and spirited them away."

"That would be hard to do," Fox said. "This wagon is visible from up there."

"Someone moving low to the ground could avoid being seen," Ben observed. "That's the only way it could have been done."

"But how could he carry two bodies away?"

Ben was staring up at the distant cabins, not hearing the question, asking instead, "Who else lives up there with you?"

It was Louella who answered. "Jack Sawyer is in the closest cabin to us. He's usually down at the stream panning for gold. Then there's Mabel Moore and her elderly mother. That is a sad case. They were traveling west to California when the mother was stricken with illness. There was an empty cabin here and they've been staying in it for six months now. I look in on them and get what food they need. The mother is always in bed when I come."

"There's one more cabin. The fourth one."

Louella glanced at her husband. "An old guy," he said. "We call him the hermit. He was already here a year ago when we moved into that empty cabin. Nobody has much to do with him because he smells so bad."

Judge Hark nodded. "I think we'd better go up and talk to them folks."

George Fox frowned. "About the missing bodies?"

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The judge nodded. "Can you take care of those horses?"

"We'll do that," Louella said.

On the way back up to the cabins, Ben fell back a few steps and said quietly to the judge, "The bodies weren't the only things missing."

"What else?"

"The knives."

Judge Hark and Ben found Jack Sawyer downstream a bit from the cabins, about ten minutes later. He was a middle-aged man with a lined face and a deep tan, as if he'd been working outdoors for most of his adult life. Straightening up as they approached, he held his back as if to brace himself against collapse. "Having any luck?" the judge asked.

Sawyer picked over the pebbles in the bottom of his pan. "Not a thing." He tried to brush the long black hair from his eyes. "This is hard work for what little I find. You guys fixin' to pan the stream too?" His accent was southern but it didn't ring true to Ben's ear.

"I'm Judge Roy Hark and this here is Ben Snow. We're looking into a couple of killings that happened earlier today over near that grove of cottonwoods beyond the cabins."

"Killings?"

"A couple of vaudeville performers traveling in a horse-drawn wagon," Ben explained. "We already talked to George Fox and his wife."

Jack Sawyer snorted. "My neighbors! At least I'm out here panning the stream. Most days I never see them, they're so busy with their lovemaking!"

They hadn't invited the comment and Ben could see the judge was a bit embarrassed by it. "They haven't seen any strangers around today. What about you?"

"I been down here since breakfast. Go ask Mabel or the hermit. I think they sit in their windows most of the day."

"We'll do that," Judge Hark promised.

They headed back up the slope, approaching the third cabin from the rear, near the small corral where the horses were kept. There was a well-tended garden by the Moores' cabin, full of blossoming flowers which Ben supposed were watered by buckets from the stream. "This place is a regular little oasis," he told the judge.

A fat middle-aged woman in a long Mother Hubbard was at the back door of the cabin, shaking out a faded blue blanket. She spoke softly when they introduced themselves. "Louella said you'd

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be over. She said there'd been some killings and to lock myself in, but I can't do that when there's work to be done."

"You live here with your mother?" Ben asked, remembering what they'd been told.

"I'm *staying* here," she corrected. "Mother Moore took sick on the trek west. We can't go on until she's well. I tend my garden and watch over her." She kept shaking the blanket while she talked. "I can't tell you anything else."

"Did you come this far by train?"

She nodded, twisting her face unpleasantly as she spoke. "Then we tried to get a wagon but she was too sick. I met Louella Fox in town and she told me about this cabin."

"I wonder if we could speak to your mother."

Mabel Moore shook her head. "She's having a bad day."

"The killings happened right down by that grove of cottonwoods, earlier this morning. If your mother was near the window she might have seen something."

Before she could answer, Ben heard a voice from inside call out weakly, "Mabel, who is out there?"

"No one, Mother. Go back to sleep."

"Who's been killed?"

The stocky woman sighed. "Now see what you've done! Come on in, but only for a moment."

The cabin had only two rooms, with the bedroom separate from a combined parlor and kitchen. He could see the outline of a trap door leading to the root cellar.

All four of the cabins would have been similarly built, probably at the same time. Mabel ushered them into the bedroom, where an elderly woman lay buried in a small mountain of comforters. A wool nightcap left only a few strands of gray hair visible.

"What is it?" she asked, repeating her question. "Who's been killed?" Her voice was husky but firm.

"A pair of vaudeville performers in their wagon," Judge Hark told her. "We thought you might have seen something from your window, perhaps some strangers riding by."

"Mabel keeps me in bed most of the time. I don't see much of anything."

"Now, Mother—"

"It's the truth! I expect she thinks I'm dying." Her voice was growing raspy until it seemed little more than a whisper.

Mabel Moore was tugging at Ben's arm. "Please let her rest. She couldn't have seen anything."

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Ben reluctantly agreed and when they'd passed into the outer room the judge asked, "What about this hermit in the next cabin? Could you take us over there?"

She shook her head. "He never answers the door. He only comes out when he feels like it, usually after dark."

Despite her words, they decided to try the last cabin. They knocked on the door for several minutes but no one appeared. "We're wasting our time here," Judge Hark decided finally. "There are no bodies and no killers. Let's push on and forget the whole thing."

Ben was watching the sun sinking low in the west. "It'll be dark soon and your horse should rest that leg till morning anyhow. What say we camp down near that wagon overnight?"

"Not afraid of ghosts, Ben?"

"Not so's you could notice."

"I guess that's the best idea. We can start fresh in the morning."

Fox was standing in the doorway of his cabin and they told him of their plan. "What about your horses? Want them back now?"

"Keep them till morning," the judge decided. "We'll probably leave early but we can come up and get them without disturbing anyone."

They unrolled their sleeping bags and built a little campfire near the wagon, as much to keep away prowling animals as to warm themselves in the balmy evening air. It was after they'd eaten, watching the single light on the hill from the Fox cabin, that Ben decided to have another look inside the wagon. Guided by the flickering firelight and the dusky remains of the day, he climbed in, trying to avoid the worst of the bloodstains. It appeared that someone had searched through the contents of the wagon, pulling clothing and supplies from their storage places. He found a supply of rolled-up posters for the act with garish printing proclaiming: *Myers & Carlotta—Magic & Music—Acrobatics & Knife-Throwing—Comedy & Drama—See Six Great Shakespearean Scenes in Ten Minutes! Fun for the Entire Family!* He put the posters back, and that was when he first detected the odor coming up from the bottom of the wagon.

Ben leaned down and tugged at one of the wooden planks that seemed to make up the wagon's floor. It slid away easily and the stench of the bodies assailed him. He had found the missing Myers and Carlotta, only inches from where they'd died. "Judge!" he called out. "You'd better look at this."

A figure scrambled into the wagon behind him and it took Ben

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an instant to realize it wasn't Judge Hark. The man had a shaggy red beard and muttered unintelligibly as he swung a wooden club at Ben's head. They grappled in the uncertain light until Ben managed to twist the club free and shove the man backwards out of the wagon. He followed, leaping to land atop the dazed figure on the ground.

"What are you trying to do?" he shouted, already certain his assailant was the mysterious hermit from the fourth cabin.

"You spying on me!" the bearded man muttered angrily, trying to rise.

Ben glanced around for Judge Hark and felt a chill of fear when he saw his crumpled form lying near the campfire. He aimed a solid blow at the hermit's jaw, knocking him out, and hurried to the judge's side. A slight stirring made him sigh with relief. "Are you all right?"

Judge Hark moved a hand to his head. "Someone hit me."

"It was that hermit. He attacked me too. He's over there."

The judge continued to hold his head for a moment and then stood up with a steadying hand from Ben. "I think I'm all right except for a headache."

"I'd better give you back your dagger money. I'm not much at protecting you from injury."

"I think the faster we get out of this place, the better."

"Just before he attacked me I found the bodies. They were under a false bottom in the wagon."

"Do you think the hermit killed them?"

"He's beginning to stir. Let's go ask him."

The hermit sat up, moving his jaw to make certain it wasn't broken. When he saw them approaching he tried to scramble to his feet but Ben grabbed him by the collar. "I don't know anything," he whined, trying to twist free.

"What's your name?" Ben demanded.

"Don't have one. I'm just a hermit. I stay in my cabin."

"You do plenty of prowling at sunset. This was a circuit judge you tried to kill. Start talking or we'll take you to the nearest jail and lock you up. Now what's your name?"

"Jesse. Just Jesse."

"How long you been living here?"

"Forever. I built these cabins."

"When was that?"

"Around eighty-six, when Geronimo was stirring up the Apaches. Folks were afraid to live in lonely cabins around here. They

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thought clusters of houses might be more protection from Indian raids. The Indians never came. Some people moved on but there were always others coming west, passing through. I just stayed."

"Why did you attack us?"

"I heard you talking about people being killed. I thought maybe you done it yourselves. I was just tryin' to protect the Moores and the Foxes and that Jack Sawyer."

"Did you ever see the people in this wagon, Myers and Carlotta?"

"I seen them when they arrived, through the window."

"When was that?"

"Few days ago."

Ben took him up to the wagon. "Look inside and tell me if that's them."

He made a face. "What a mess! That's them, all right."

"Did you talk to them at all?"

He shook his head. "I keep to myself. I'd overhear them talking to the others, though. She was nice. He was loud, wanted his own way."

"What about?"

"He wanted to get moving but she was all for staying a bit. She and that Fox woman struck up a friendship."

As if on cue, a voice reached them through the near-darkness. "Mr. Snow, Judge? Are you all right?" It was Louella Fox and she stepped into the firelight carrying her husband's rifle.

"We're here by the wagon," Ben said. "Everything's fine. Jesse is with us."

"Who?" It took her an instant to focus on the hermit's face. "Jesse! What are you doing roaming around? Why aren't you in your cabin?"

He seemed cowed by her sudden appearance. "I—I thought these were bad people. I'm sorry."

"Come on," she said, not unkindly. "I'll take you home."

"Stay here and rest," Ben told the judge. "I'll walk up with them."

Louella escorted the hermit to the door of his cabin and he went in without another word. "Sometimes he's not right in the head," she explained. "He thinks all this land is his, and any gold we pan from the stream belongs to him."

"Is there much gold?" Ben asked as they strolled back toward her cabin.

"Very little. Sawyer is the only one who works at it full time."

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She paused by her cabin door. "I'm sorry if Jesse frightened you, Mr. Snow."

"It was nothing. We had a couple of frights tonight. Those missing bodies turned up again, in a hidden compartment in the wagon."

She took a quick intake of breath. "Then someone will be coming to investigate the killings."

"I think so. Tell your husband to wrap the bodies in sheets and put them in a cool place, maybe your root cellar."

"All right."

"We'll be moving on."

She was standing very close and he was aware of the natural aroma of her body. "How soon? Will you be leaving in the morning?"

Before he could answer, the cabin door opened and the light from their oil lamp showed George Fox standing there. "Are you going to stay out there all night, Louella?" He seemed angry and there was a dab of butter on his chin, as if he'd been eating dinner when he heard them talking.

"I must go in," she told Ben. "Good night."

He walked back down the hill to the campfire. "Feeling better?" he asked Judge Hark.

"I'll live. Did you get the hermit back to his cabin?"

Ben nodded. "And I told Louella to have her husband wrap up the bodies. No telling when the local sheriff will get out here."

"Let's try to get some sleep," the judge decided. "We should be up at daybreak."

But Ben never slept that night. He watched the light in the Foxes' cabin until it went out, then focused his eyes on the dark at the top of the hill, his pistol close at hand. He was convinced the killer of the vaudevillians was up there in one of those cabins, and he wasn't going to risk another attack on Judge Hark or himself. However, the night passed without incident, save for an occasional unseen animal threading its way through the underbrush.

At the first light of dawn Ben Snow roused himself and stirred the dying campfire into life, putting a coffeepot on to boil. He shook Judge Hark awake and told him he was going for the horses. "We'll have some coffee and then get moving."

"Fine by me," the judge replied, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

Ben glanced into the wagon and saw that the bodies were still there. He'd half feared they might have disappeared for a second time. Then he started up the hill to the corral. Though the hour

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was early, Jack Sawyer was already coming out of his cabin with his gold-panning equipment. He hadn't bothered to shave and a dark stubble of beard ran along his chin. "You still around?" he asked gruffly.

"Just getting the horses and we'll be on our way."

Sawyer grunted and headed down toward the stream.

That was when Ben turned toward Mabel Moore's garden and saw that all the flowers were dead.

Back at the campfire with their horses, he told Judge Hark about it. The judge, satisfied that his horse's leg was properly healed, turned his attention to Ben. "Flowers don't die overnight in this weather."

"These did. They'd been cut off and stuck back into the soft soil to look as if they were still growing. They died within a few hours, of course."

"Why would anyone do that?"

"There's something damned peculiar going on here, Judge. I think the flowers were cut off or uprooted yesterday because something was buried in the flower bed. They were stuck back in the ground when we rode up unexpectedly and found those bodies in the wagon."

"But who'd be buried there? The murder victims are still in the wagon."

Then Ben realized he knew the answer to that question, and should have known it before this. "Tie the horses and come with me, Judge. This is where I earn my money."

"By protecting me?"

"I was seen examining those flowers. We won't be allowed to leave here alive."

It was Louella who greeted them at the top of the hill. "I thought you'd be gone by now."

"Not quite yet," Ben told her. "We have to dig up Mabel's flower garden first."

"I see," Louella said, all smiles. The knife came out of her sleeve and her arm was arcing back to throw it when Ben shot her in the shoulder.

Jack Sawyer came running around the cabin, raising his rifle. Ben took the advice he'd given that punk kid in the cantina and shot him in the leg.

"What is this?" Judge Hark demanded. "Did they kill Myers and Carlotta?"

"You don't see it yet, do you? These *are* Myers and Carlotta.

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They killed everyone else before we arrived. What's happened here is that the murder victims are still alive and the suspects are all dead."

Ben and Judge Hark bandaged the prisoners' wounds and tied them securely in the wagon after the bodies were removed. Then they dug up the four bodies in the flower bed, wrapped all six tightly in separate sheets, and left them to be picked up later. All the time Ben was explaining it, feeling a bit like a lawyer outlining his case before the bar. "The key to the whole thing was probably that poster I found for their vaudeville act. It listed the highlights of their act, including six great Shakespearean scenes in ten minutes. Obviously, in addition to being magicians, comedians, and knife-throwers, Myers and Carlotta were quick-change artists. Our big mistake was thinking that the bodies in the wagon had to be theirs. More likely they were the real Foxes. The supposed Fox told me they moved into the empty cabin a year ago, but those old calendars nailed to the wall made it look more like three or four years for the real Foxes."

Judge Hark simply shook his head. "Do you mean to tell me that all these people we met—Louella and George Fox, Jack Sawyer, Mabel Moore and her mother, and even the hermit Jesse—were parts being played by these vaudevillians?"

"Exactly, and I'll prove it to you. Remember, we never saw more than two of them at one time."

"First you'd better explain to me how they could get from one cabin to another almost instantly, without going outside."

"There's only one possible way. I noticed trap doors leading to the root cellars. Obviously these cellars are connected. When the four cabins were built they were linked underground, probably to offer some protection against the Apache raids that never came. Fox or one of the others must have shown the tunnels to the performers while they were staying here."

"Still, how could they play all those parts? Did they just make up the characters?"

"No, I think the people were real enough. They portrayed them more or less as they were, so any descriptions we gave later would be close to the truth. They were merely doing what they did on stage, using a variety of wigs, makeup, and padding, only these six people weren't Shakespearean characters. Two of them were quite easy, in fact. Mabel Moore's mother and the hermit Jesse were so hidden by bedclothes and a nightcap, and false hair and

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beard in Jesse's case, that very little makeup or acting was required on Myers's part. Carlotta, of course, played Louella Fox and Mabel Moore, the latter with stuffing to make her look fat. It was an easy disguise beneath that shapeless Mother Hubbard. Myers was George Fox, and Sawyer with lots of makeup for the tanned look, and the two easy ones, Mother Moore and the hermit."

"But what was their motive?" Judge Hark asked.

"The gold, of course. They stopped here for a few days and heard about panning for gold. They rightly or wrongly assumed there were gold nuggets hidden in or under those cabins. I have no idea who was the first to die—probably Sawyer—but once they'd killed one of them they had to kill all six. Somehow the Foxes managed to hide. The other four were killed and buried beneath Mabel's flower bed, probably early yesterday. The Foxes tried to escape in the wagon and were caught and stabbed to death by Myers. That's when we happened along, walking our horses. I think Myers hid in the secret compartment beneath the floorboards of the wagon. When we went up to the cabins, he stowed the bodies out of sight in the compartment and sneaked back up the hill to one of the cabins, using the underground passages to reach the Fox cabin and emerge as George Fox, the man he'd recently killed. Remember how Louella often kept us waiting for Fox to appear? And how Mabel Moore blocked the door with that blanket-shaking until Myers could change from his Sawyer makeup and come up through the trapdoor to become the bed-ridden Mother Moore? She wouldn't let us into the cabin until she heard Mother Moore's voice say it was all right."

"Evidence, Ben! Give me evidence!"

"All right. We had the wagon horses with us, remember, and those horses belonged to Myers and Carlotta. One of the horses went to the supposed Fox and nuzzled him. Fox had a sugar cube ready to give the horse. That's hardly the act of a near stranger, but rather the act of the horse's owner. Then there was Carlotta, playing the part of Louella Fox. I noted a trace of a Mexican accent when she spoke, perhaps more in keeping with a Carlotta than a Louella. Speaking of accents, I thought when I first met him that Sawyer's southern accent didn't ring true. Likewise, Mabel Moore seemed to twist her face unnaturally while we talked, trying to change her appearance. And her mother's voice grew huskier the more she talked, even after just a few words, and finally turned to a whisper. The best proof I have is probably

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the punch on the jaw I gave to Jesse the hermit last night. The fake beard was some protection, but Myers still would have had a bruise to hide. Remember when Louella walked the hermit to his cabin? She lingered with me on the way back to her own. She was giving Myers time to shed his hermit's disguise and reappear at her cabin door as George Fox. What did he do about the bruise? He covered it with a dab of butter, as if he'd been eating something. Same thing this morning when I encountered Myers in his Sawyer makeup. He seemed to have a sudden growth of dark fuzz on his chin, again covering the bruise."

Judge Hark bent down with his handkerchief and wiped it along their struggling prisoner's jaw. The shadow of a beard came away, revealing a bruised area on the chin. "I'll be damned! But why all this pretense? Why didn't they just kill us too?"

"They *enjoyed* the pretense, and they were probably afraid to kill a judge at first. Later Myers had a try at it in his Jesse disguise, but what they really wanted was for us to report that everyone but Myers and Carlotta had been alive and well when we passed through." As he talked Ben thought of something else. "Another mistake they made: Only the Fox cabin showed a light last night, both early and late. With us on the scene they should have at least lit a candle in each of the other three cabins, but they'd gotten careless."

"Still, it could have been the real Foxes who did all this, who killed their neighbors and then killed Myers and Carlotta. Why not?"

"After the bodies disappeared, I found them hidden in the wagon's secret compartment. The killer or killers had to know about that compartment. Fox and his wife wouldn't have known, nor any of the others, but of course Myers and Carlotta knew. So they had to be the killers, not the victims."

Ben and Judge Hark drove the wagon into the next town with their own horses trailing behind. The judge found a leather pouch full of small gold nuggets hidden among Carlotta's clothing. It was the performers' sole loot from the killing of six people. "I'll stop on my way back and try the case," he told the sheriff.

But two weeks later, when they doubled back on the circuit, they discovered that the justice system still had a long way to go in the territories. The sheriff spat on the ground and told them, "Those two weren't worth the cost of a trial. We hanged them last week." ●

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

TOO BAD ABOUT MARGERY

by John Ford

"Margery always said he was harmless," Ray Larsen said. We sat on a balcony eighteen stories above Pacific Avenue while an early April Vancouver evening turned dark. The warm air smelled of Japanese cherry blossoms from the trees along the street that curved into Stanley Park.

". . . She was a good judge of character, too," he added.

During the pause I'd been thinking, Everyone's harmless until they want something they can't have. But there didn't seem any point in saying it. Ray was still trying to adjust to the fact that someone he and his wife had known for eleven years had killed her.

English by birth and educated in Scotland, John Ford settled in Canada in 1961 and currently lives in a suburb of Vancouver. As a weekly columnist for *The Tri-City News*, he takes a lighthearted look at life, listing as one of his main regrets that he didn't write *Lake Wobegon Days* before Garrison Keillor did. Mr. Ford is in a more serious mood for his fiction debut, but the story still emanates a homey warmth. ✝

"I always saw him as a bit of a lecher," he said. "He never missed a chance to put an arm around Margery and he was always making suggestive remarks. Nothing crude, just a bit near the bone."

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I'd seen a lot of men our age get that way. Married fifteen or twenty years, the wife starting to remind you of the living-room furniture you bought as newlyweds, sagging in places and a little faded but still comfortable. It was a time when those who could afford to ran off with their secretaries or bought Corvettes, and those who weren't so well fixed looked around their circle of friends for similar signs of restlessness.

"I never thought he was capable of killing anyone," Ray said. "I mean, does he look like a killer?"

"Do you look like an engineer? Do I look like an out-of-work businessman or a private-eye wannabe?"

That got a smile out of him. When I'd quit the business scene three years earlier, I'd set myself up as an investigator, hoping my years as credit manager, newspaper reporter, skip tracer, and negotiator would be useful to people and organizations that hadn't the skills or patience to find out things they thought it was important to know.

I no longer dressed like a businessman, and hoped I didn't look like one—or like a singer, bartender, or drunk; although I'd been all of those too in my fifty-two years.

"You know what I mean," Ray said. "Look at the faces in the papers and on television. Something always seems to tell you the guy's capable of murder."

I didn't argue. It was Sunday, less than a week since Margery's death and only forty-eight hours since the police had arrested the alleged killer. I was trying to help Ray, and I didn't think that included a lecture on the fallacy of taking anything at face value, particularly in the last decade of the twentieth century when deviousness and deceit have been raised to art forms. Besides, Larry Chatelaine might have gotten away with it if it hadn't been for a carelessly placed glass of gin. It was that gin glass that had started Ray thinking . . .

"Margery didn't *drink* gin, Dan," Ray said when he called me the morning after Margery was found dead in the hot tub of their Maple Ridge home. "She hardly drank at all except a glass of wine at dinner."

I was trying to imagine Margery as one of those bored suburban housewives doing lunch with the girls, having a few martinis, then going home and having another. It was an easy pattern to slip into, especially if you didn't have children coming home from school in the afternoon and your main focus was getting something on the table

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by the time your husband arrived. But Margery didn't fit that category. In eleven years I'd never seen her drink anything but wine, usually white, "in a tall glass with lots of ice." I even remembered the last time I'd heard her ask for one: a house-warming party for Larry and Beryl Chatelaine when they moved into their townhouse north of the Haney Bypass.

I knew the Chatelaines through my ex-wife Shirley, who'd met Beryl at church. Before the divorce, Shirley and I had seen the Chatelaines three or four times a year. Beryl and Margery were much closer. "It's as if they've each found the sister they never had," Shirley explained. "In a group they gravitate towards one another and don't seem to need anyone else."

But now Margery was gone.

"Did you tell the police about the glass?" I asked Ray.

"I found it after they left. Should I call them?"

"Where is it now?"

"In the dishwasher."

"They won't be able to do anything with it," I said. "Ray, can I come over and look around? Don't touch anything else. Make some coffee and stay put. Try and remember what you've done since the police left. Everything. See you in half an hour."

When I got there he was sitting on the deck. There was a pad and pencil beside his coffee mug.

"Nothing else unusual," he said after we'd run down the list. "The sunroof of her car was open. I closed it to keep the cats out. Gardening tools and gloves on the picnic table. I put them in the shed. A chicken by the sink for dinner."

It was all distressingly normal. We talked about her daily routine, but Ray was vague on details.

"So many things you take for granted, don't pay attention to. It's not till things change that you remember how they were."

He could have been talking about my own marriage. I tried to recall the minutiae of my life with Shirley, hoping to jog Ray's memory, but I found only a blur of days that had rolled along one after another like breakers on the Oregon coast, the monotony broken only by occasional high days or holidays, like the ninth wave surfers wait for that often turns out to be the eighteenth or the twenty-seventh, and when it gets there as often as not you're too busy trying to keep your balance to take advantage of it. I hoped Ray would handle his bachelorhood better than I had. I didn't think he'd dive into a bottle and swim in it for a year like me, but there were other things that could jump up and bite a nice guy like Ray.

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"Did Margery have an appointment book?" I asked. "A calendar she wrote things in? Things to do, people to see?"

"She was a great one for lists," Ray said, "if we were going on a trip or having company for dinner or anything. I used to tell her she should make a list of all her lists."

The smile, the first I'd seen in the hour we'd been talking, quickly slipped from his face and he got up and led me to the kitchen.

Near the telephone we found Margery's list for that day: *dry cleaning, dolomite lime, moss killer, call Beryl, renew insurance, balance bank statement.* Lines were drawn through the last three items.

Nearby was a Manila folder. I looked inside: several sheets of paper, a pencil, and the minutes of the last council meeting. A few words or phrases from the minutes were underlined and in the margin alongside she'd written "Beryl." On the calendar above the phone, in that day's space, was written, "Council mtg. 7:00." Margery and Beryl had sat on the town council together. I always thought the bond between them was based more on their differences than anything else, but it was an effective combination. With their good-guy, bad-guy routine they usually managed to impose their collective will on the mayor and his constantly changing cast of supporting players.

"Did you call Beryl?" I asked Ray.

"I haven't called anyone."

"It's not something she should hear on the news or read in the paper."

Tears brimmed in his eyes but he blinked them away. "Could you call her for me?"

I tried, but an answering machine clicked on after four rings. I hung up. "I'll try later," I told Ray, and then I left him to begin my inquiries.

The afternoon passed in the grinding, monotonous routine I remembered from my days as a newspaper reporter. I was able to read the police report thanks to a call by one of my last contacts at the *Herald*, Steve Gushue, to Sergeant Toews of the Maple Ridge RCMP. Steve told him I was writing a piece for the local paper about Margery's community activities and Toews saw no harm in showing me the file; I saw no need to tell Toews that the reason for my interest—apart from the fact I'd known her and Ray so long—was that her husband wasn't satisfied she'd died accidentally.

The report gave the cause of death as an occipital fracture that the coroner said was consistent with Margery's having slipped and

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cracked her head on the edge of the hot tub. Her bathrobe and towel were hung over the screen and her book was on the top step within easy reach. No mention of the tumbler of gin.

I used the same story about doing a feature on Margery with Ray's neighbors as I went from door to door asking if they'd noticed anything unusual. Predictably they had more questions than answers, but at a house on the corner I got my one piece of hard information, from the mother of three preschoolers. Between scolds and yells and attempts to feed a reluctant thirteen-month-old, she said she remembered a blue and black pickup taking the corner too fast while she'd been outside with the children. She hadn't gotten a look at the driver, and while she thought it could have been a company vehicle, she hadn't caught the name or logo.

Towards six o'clock husbands were getting home and families sitting down to dinner; I didn't want to interrupt what might be their only time of the day together so I went back to Ray's, drank another cup of coffee, and offered to stay the night.

"Thanks anyway. I'm all right."

"I stay up late and I get up early," I said. "Call me anytime, even if you've got nothing to say."

The street lamps had come on while I was inside. As I reached my car, light winked at me from the gutter. I picked up a disposable cigarette lighter with metal top, blue body, and black lettering that said "Aragon Oil." Evidently it hadn't been there long. I dropped it in my pocket. I was almost home before I remembered that Larry Chatelaine worked for Aragon. When I got to my apartment I called Ray.

"You and Margery used to see a lot of the Chatelaines, go to each other's place for dinner, that kind of thing?"

"Yes," he said. "Why?"

"Have they been over lately? In the past few days?"

"It's been a couple of months. We didn't see as much of them after they sold the house they raised the kids in and moved to that townhouse."

I told him about the lighter. "It's probably a promotional item, not too politically correct nowadays."

"That wouldn't bother Larry," Ray said. "He's old-fashioned. Pinup calendars in his office. Girls in gauzy underwear and vacant smiles. And he still tells raunchy jokes. He's a big kid."

I had the same impression. Larry was on the other side of fifty from me but despite a boyish face his body looked older. A lot of college football players get that way, from all the punishment they take, I guess; but a lot of them forget their glory days when they

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marry and raise families. Larry still reminisced at every opportunity about the games he played when he was young, including football, and when he got warmed up at social functions Beryl was likely to spend the evening rolling her eyes, shrugging her shoulders, and trying to look as if she'd come with someone else.

Next morning I drove to the Aragon refinery on the Barnet Highway. The girl at the desk in the spartan office looked at a board and said Larry was out but she expected him back in a half-hour. I waited on an uncomfortable chair, canvas and tubular steel, idling through the *Herald*.

Through the window I saw a pickup bounce in at the main gate and a minute later Larry came up the front steps two at a time. The tight frown on his boyish face gave way to a tight smile when he saw me. We shook hands and traded hellos.

In his office he offered coffee. I said no thanks and waited while he got some for himself. He kicked the door closed and said, as he crossed the floor, "Too bad about Margery, huh?"

"Ray's taking it hard," I said. "But it's this I wanted to see you about."

I showed him the lighter I'd found. He told me only he and two other people had access to the supply, and since the others didn't know the Larsens it was obvious neither of them had dropped it. He also agreed that, judging by its condition, it hadn't been outside long. We went to his truck and he showed me a box of lighters on the shelf in front of the passenger's seat. It had been ripped open and a few lighters lay loose on the shelf, a couple more on the floor under the seat.

"I guess one could have fallen out without being noticed," he admitted.

We went back into his office and he dropped into the swivel tilter behind his desk, almost making it vanish. He was still huge across the shoulders and through the chest; his arms looked capable of not only encircling but lifting one of the oil barrels I could see through the window. His short haircut made him look as if he should be wearing a shirt with a number on the back. For a second I thought I saw tears, but then he raised his refilled cup of coffee and I couldn't see his eyes any longer.

"I've heard some talk about your having a thing for Margery," I said. "I plan to talk to the RCMP. They might ask you about it."

When he told me I was crazy I threw in the neighbor's report of

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seeing an Aragon pickup go by about the time Margery died."They'll want to know where you were."

"What time was it?"

"Twelve-thirty, one o'clock."

"I was home having lunch."

"With Beryl?"

"No. She was at the library doing research. I had a sandwich and plugged in my Walkman. Afterwards I lay down for a half-hour, then drove back to the plant." He paused. "It's not so good with us these days. I think Beryl's going through the change. We argue a lot. I stay out of her way."

I met Beryl for lunch that same afternoon at the John B, a five-minute walk from the junior-secondary school where she was working that week as a substitute teacher. When I arrived she was ordering a martini. I asked for a Coors Light and we discussed the weather and each other's health until the waitress brought the drinks and took our orders.

"I don't usually drink at lunch," Beryl told me as a second martini arrived right behind the chicken salad sandwich. "I've been on edge since I heard about Margery."

Her edges were, I mused, definitely frayed. There were dark pouches below her eyes that I hadn't noticed before, and a tautness to her skin. I reminded myself that she was, after all, nearly fifty and that she'd recently lost a friend who'd been closer than many of her relatives. She had a right to look ragged.

When it seemed she'd done all she could with the sandwich, no more than three small bites before pushing the plate aside to make room for a fresh martini, I told her about my chat with her husband and asked what she remembered about the day Margery died. She confirmed she'd spent the day at the library. She was a compulsive reader, the sort who researched anything and everything that caught her interest, which probably explained why she was comfortable with any class she was assigned to as a substitute teacher. A formidable woman, physically and intellectually, when she got called to work she didn't even ask what class she'd be covering: Music, English, History, or P.E., she was equal to them all. The day of Margery's death she was in the library all day, stopping only long enough for lunch.

"Did you check in to tell Larry you wouldn't be home?" I asked.

"I called home just before one but there was no answer." She looked at me warily, as if she wondered where this was leading.

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"He said he had his Walkman going. How loud is your phone? Maybe he didn't hear it. Or he might have been asleep."

"Could be. Seems like all he does is eat, sleep, and work."

"Is it possible . . ." I started, then hesitated.

These people were friends, close friends of Ray and Margery. Maybe I shouldn't get involved in this. Then I remembered how Ray had looked at me in that house now empty of Margery, the way he'd said, "What am I going to do? I miss her already."

"D'you think Larry's seeing another woman?" I asked. "He admits you and he aren't getting along too well. Is that one of the reasons?"

She started a sneer but turned it into a smile that still came out bitter. "You know the old saying, Dan. Some do and some talk."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning Larry talks constantly about women. 'Doesn't Helen look terrific? I wonder if George is keeping her happy.' Or, 'Sylvia gets cuter every day. If I was single and ten years younger I'd take a run at her myself.' And of course there was Margery, his special favorite. Always so attentive to her, always asking about her, saying we should have them over for dinner soon."

"But you don't think he was . . ."

"I don't want to talk about it," she broke in. "Why are you so interested anyway? Or are you just nosy?"

I told her, as gently as I could, that I thought Larry might have killed Margery. I mentioned the lighter and the truck, although I was more honest with Beryl than I'd been with Larry; I didn't say it was an Aragon truck, only that it could have been. "He doesn't have an alibi," I said. "He says he went home and had lunch and a nap. You called the house and he didn't answer. You see how it looks?"

Her eyes narrowed and her mouth became a tight line. I hoped I wasn't doing the wrong thing by adding more bad news to what she'd already absorbed. Her hand tightened on her glass and a vein stood out on her forearm.

"Can't the office account for him? Didn't he call in?"

"Even if he had, he could have been calling from anywhere, even Margery's. No one knows where he was when she died, and a lot of things say he could have been with her. Sorry, Beryl. I have to take what I know to the police."

My circle of friends was dwindling rapidly. Even if I was wrong, I couldn't expect either Larry or Beryl to be warm towards me next time we met. But again I thought about Ray, and that made what I had to do a bit easier.

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"We were like sisters," Beryl said, taking a last sip of her drink. "Has Ray said when the funeral will be?"

"Saturday. You going?"

"We'll be there. Both of us."

But only Beryl made it to the funeral. Larry was arrested on Friday evening when he got home from work, as a result of my report to the RCMP.

The officer on the desk hadn't wanted to listen at first, but in the end Ray and I were shuffled into the office of the CO, a master sergeant named McKellar who'd been transferred in from Edmonton four months earlier and was so taken with the West Coast he didn't want to risk being reassigned just yet.

One of Beryl's neighbors had seen the Aragon truck leave the Chatelaines' garage at twelve-twenty the day of Margery's death; another had seen it come back just before one and leave again within fifteen minutes. A police officer drove four different routes from Larry's house to Ray's, allowing for a five- or ten-minute stop along the way, to pin down the timing. I don't know who else they talked to or what other experiments they did because by then my cover was blown and so were my chances of seeing any more of their reports.

The upshot was that they arrested Larry two days later and now I was trying to explain to Ray—and myself—what might have come over Larry who, after leching and maybe even lusting after Margery for a decade or more, had evidently decided to find out if the attraction—if that's the word—was mutual.

"There's always something seems to tell you the guy's capable of killing," Ray said. "But Larry? I can't see it."

"It's hard," I said, "when you've known someone that long, to find out you don't really know them at all. Look at Shirley and me. When we got engaged we were going to have two, maybe three kids, but it took four years of being married to her to find out she didn't really want to be a mother and another four to find out she didn't even want to be a wife."

Maybe he couldn't think of anything to say, or maybe he was wondering if it would have been easier on him if Larry had persuaded Margery to run off with him. I didn't want to think about how far the ripples from that pebble might spread, so I looked across the balcony to the trees in Stanley Park. The apartment we were sitting in belonged to a fellow who worked alongside Ray at TriMar. Ray'd moved in with him after being hit by the second part of the double

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whammy: he'd lost Margery, and now, with Larry's arrest, he'd also lost a friend.

"Beryl . . ." Ray finally said.

"What about her?" I prompted. "She's had a rough time too. You talked to her since the funeral?"

"She called Friday, after Larry was charged. I just remembered. Said she was sorry for the mess. Hoped I wouldn't think badly of her. I thought it was a strange thing to say."

"Strange is right. Why would you think badly of her?"

"That's what I wondered."

"She was probably in shock."

"Sounded more like she was in the bag."

"She was drinking pretty heavily when I had lunch with her. I hope she's okay."

But suddenly I knew she wasn't. I'd been so preoccupied with the case that I hadn't been paying enough attention to the people involved, and I realized that Beryl probably needed attention as much as Ray, maybe even more.

"I have to go see her," I said. "She may need help." The same kind of help, I thought, that I had looked for in vain after my divorce, before I hit the bottle.

I drove Lougheed Highway in light traffic, wondering how to approach Beryl. A half-hour after leaving Ray I was on her doorstep and I still didn't have a plan. As it turned out I didn't need one.

"Who's there?" she said from behind the door. It was hard to tell from her voice whether she was sober or otherwise.

"Hi, Beryl. It's Dan Jamieson. Can I talk to you?"

I waited while a chain was unhooked and locks were turned; the door opened and I looked into the muzzle of a small pistol. I stood still, squinting against the light from behind Beryl, my eyes torn between the gun and her face. The skin around her eyes seemed darker than when I'd last seen her, but that, I reminded myself, had been during the day in a public place. Now, with no makeup and dressed in a shapeless smock, she looked awful. The corners of her mouth lifted in an effort at a smile, but when she spoke there was no hint of amusement or pleasure.

"Got it figured out?" she said, and now I could hear the slurring. "Fitted all the pieces together?"

"Are you all right, Beryl?" I said. "Were you expecting someone else? It's me, Dan."

"I know who it is," she snapped. "Smart-ass Jamieson, Mr. Nosy, goes around spying on his friends. Step inside."

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"Put the gun away," I said, not moving. Now that I could see she wasn't sober I was nervous. "I'll take it if you like, put it back where it belongs." I put out my hand slowly, not wanting to startle her.

She backed off a step. "This is where it belongs. Told you to come inside. Don't want the neighbors to know I 'sociate with people like you."

"What's this about?" I stayed still, risking less that way, I reasoned, than by going inside.

"Get in here." Her voice rasped and her face was no longer that of a middle-aged woman but more like one of those angry punk-rock singers of indeterminate sex that glare out at you from posters in record stores.

Moving slowly, I did as she said. She backed up to let me in.

"Close the door." She kept her eyes on me, picked up a glass from the hall table, and drank from it.

"Guns and liquor don't mix well," I said softly. "How much have you had to drink?"

"Not enough. Still know who you are and what you're doing."

"You're not making much sense," I said, but a bell was beginning to go off in my head—the van in the driveway, Larry asleep on the couch, Beryl on her lunch break from the library.

"The hell with Larry. Don't play innocent with me, Dan. I know why you're here; been expecting you. I know your head games. You're not as stupid as you'd like me to think. Probably had it figured out days ago, and just waiting for me to do something foolish."

"And did you?"

She laughed. It wasn't a pleasant sound.

"Did I? Don't I always? How far back do I have to go? My wedding day? Graduation? Junior high? Preschool? Always count on Beryl to do something foolish, but usually I was the only one who suffered. This time someone else got hurt, and you know what? I don't give a damn. I'm tired of suffering. Let somebody else do it for a while."

She drained the glass and looked around, presumably for a refill. I estimated she was about three paces away from me, and I wondered whether I could get to her before she got to the bottle. One slow, soft step, another, then a third, but by then she had seen or sensed my approach. Her head turned, her hand came up, and she fired.

The sound was overwhelming in the small room. My body had tensed as she fired and had gone limp when I realized the bullet had missed me, but I drove myself towards her, grabbed her wrist, and held her arm down alongside her body so that the gun pointed at the

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floor. A small cloud of blue smoke drifted to the ceiling and there was a coppery smell in the air. At the sound of the shot Beryl's eyes had gone wide, but now she looked ready for a nap. Her eyelids drooped and her body sagged against me.

Taking the gun from her unresisting grip, I dropped it on the rug and slid it out of reach with my foot; I eased her to the couch and set her down gently. Her head lolled, her eyes opened, and she looked at me as if I were something she'd need rubber gloves to touch.

"You still here?" Every word was slurred now. "Thought I got rid of you. What happened?"

"You need some practice."

"Need a drink."

"No you don't. Why don't you tell me why you tried to shoot me? Give me some answers, then we'll see about a drink."

"Don't want to talk. You know what's going on. Call the police if you haven't already. Are they on the way? How much time do we have? I really need a drink, Dan. I'll be going without for a long time when they lock me up." She gave me a little-girl look that on her haggard face was awful to see. "Larry would get me a drink if he was here," she said with a pout.

"But he's not. It's just you and me. Why would you think I'd call the police, Beryl? And why talk about being locked up?"

"That's what they do to killers, isn't it? Lock 'em up and throw away the key?"

"Are you saying you killed Margery?" I said.

"You didn't really think it was Larry, did you? I told you he had a soft spot for her. He'd sooner have killed himself."

"You were driving his truck? How'd you manage that without him knowing?"

"He was asleep when I got home. I knew I had plenty of time to get to Margery's and back before he woke up. I turned the phone off to be safe."

"Why?" It was all I could think of, but remembering what she'd said about Larry the previous week I thought I already knew the reason.

She gave me a pitying look. "You shouldn't have to ask. It was a matter of survival. Mine." Closing her eyes, she turned her head to the wall.

I felt as if I needed a drink, but decided to settle for a glass of water. I was standing in the kitchen waiting for the tap to run cold when I heard the shot from the other room. The glass slipped and smashed in the sink as I ran back to the living room. But I was too late. ●

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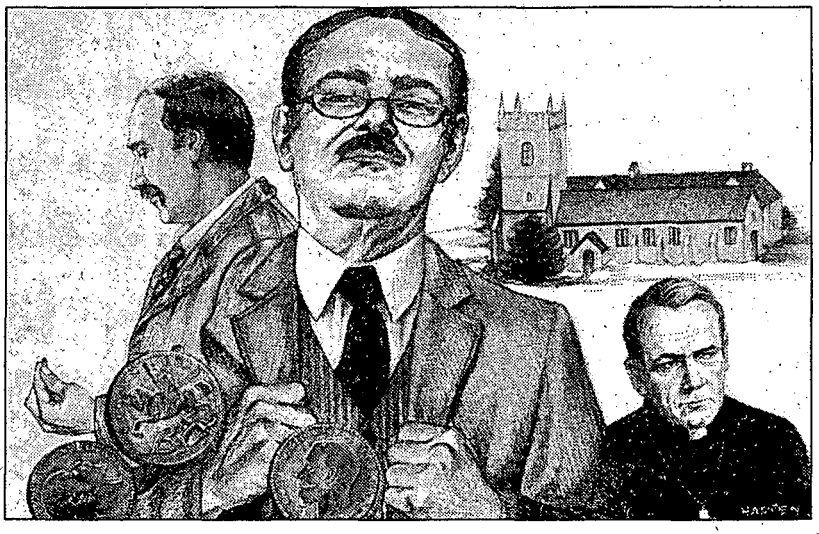

AND BROKE HIS CROWN

by David Williams

"I don't like it. *I* don't luh-luh-like it at all," complained Canon Septimus Crawley, Vicar of King's Minsted, pulling nervously at the hairs sprouting from his right ear. Head bent low, and long frame hunched inside his cassock, he paced the polished wood floor between desk and window like a pained personification of a question mark. "Especially on cuh-cuh-Christmas Eve," he added, aiming sidelong glances over the desk and his half-glasses at the two men seated in his study.

"No alternative, I'm afraid, Vicar. Temptation's far greater with the church full. Collections are better at festival times. Huge at Christmas, as you know. The Christmas Eve carol service tomorrow evening is the perfect time to trap our criminal," countered the dapper Major Clarence Probe-Hyslop, crisp and dogmatic, in military style. The proprietor of the town's largest estate agency, he had not been a serving officer for over sixteen years—to be exact,

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not since he was invalided out of the army with varicose veins in June 1915. "War wounds," he had explained at the time. He held on to the title "major" because it was good for business—and he was long-serving churchwarden of St. Oswald's Church for much the same reason. "As Sergeant Jones here says, the fellow's got to be caught red-handed, what?" He sucked hard on the short-stemmed, big-bowled pipe, and looked across at the Welsh plainclothes policeman for confirmation.

The twentieth whodunit by David Williams, *Dead in the Market*, was published in the U.K. in 1996. The book, which features Chief Inspector Parry of the South Wales Police, does not yet have a U.S. publisher, but readers can choose from a number of novels in the author's Mark Treasure series. See *Treasure by Post* (St. Martin's, 1992). ¶

"That's right enough, Major. We've got to have evidence, and I've told you how we can get it." The bouncy Handel Jones blinked twice, uncrossed his legs, and leaned well forward in his chair, putting a heavy strain on his trousers. " 'A bruised reed should he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench,' " he quoted, almost confidentially, as if he were sharing a racing tip, his dark eyes narrowing before he straightened his back again: "Isaiah forty-two, verse three," he added, staring meaningfully at the vicar, whose only response was a suspicious glare.

"Quite," commented Major Probe-Hyslop, because he didn't know what else to say. A Bible-thumping policeman was new in his experience.

"But we could so easily have had a quiet word with Rubb," Canon Crawley put in, still pacing. It hadn't been his idea to go to the police. It was Probe-Hyslop who had done that, without consulting anyone. Within his rights as sole churchwarden, no doubt, but still an overkill, was the vicar's considered opinion. And now it was too late to turn back. "We could just have pointed out the ter-ter-temporary error of his ways," he went on, the speech affectation of his undergraduate days returning involuntarily in his agitation. "We shouldn't really have needed to-to-to involve the authorities—"

"Pointed out the error of Alfred Rubb's ways? And then had him sue us for slander, Vicar?" the major interrupted. "With no evidence against him yet, we might as well accuse the curate."

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"You don't suspect the curate as well, do you, sir?" put in the policeman, less eagerly than would have been excusable in the son of a Primitive Methodist lay preacher predicating moral lapse by a Church of England clergyman.

"Of course we dough-dough-don't suspect the curate," countered the vicar, momentarily halting his stride and clasping and unclasping anguished hands behind his back.

"But the major did mention to me yesterday that the curate sometimes cashed up what's in the collection plates, sir. That's the Reverend G. G. Moxton, isn't it?" Jones smoothed his heavy walrus moustache while consulting a dog-eared notebook, just removed from his fawn raincoat pocket, and which he was perching on the battered trilby hat resting in his lap. He had declined to remove the damp coat on arrival, which, in consequence, had now begun to steam gently from the heat of the substantial coal fire behind his chair.

"Mr. Moxton only deals with collection at one Sunday service." It was Probe-Hyslop who had responded. "That's at the eight-o'clock communion, where the attendance is never very big. There hasn't been any falling off in the collections then. That's only happening at the eleven-o'clock matins and six-o'clock evensong, where I check the totals myself." He failed to remark the policeman's black eyebrows rise a touch as he continued. "That's after Rubb, the verger, has done a first count. Then I enter the totals in the parish account book and lock the money in the safe."

"I see, sir. So, to go over what you told me at Worcester police station. On Sundays, Mr. Rubb, in a black gown, leads the two main services. During worship, he sits behind the presiding clergyman, and performs various other tasks. One of those occurs during the singing of the last hymn, when he takes the filled collection plates from the altar table and puts them in the clergy vestry." He looked up from his notes. "The vestry is on the left-hand side of the altar, under the church tower, sir?"

"Yes. I'll show you when we go over to the church," Probe-Hyslop provided, while relighting his pipe. He also glanced at the time. It was nearly five, and he'd promised to be home by half past.

"Thank you, sir. And when a service is over, Mr. Rubb goes from the choir vestry, which is at the far end of the church, to the clergy vestry, by himself, to start counting the money, where you usually join him a bit later."

"Yes, when I've finished speaking to departing members of the congregation about church business. The vicar and the curate stay

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at the church door for longer than I do, shaking hands with everyone," he completed in a tone that suggested their function was a good deal less vital than his.

"And nobody else can get at the collection plates between the time Mr. Rubb takes them into the vestry and when he comes back after the service, sir?"

"That's right. There are two doors to the clergy vestry. He locks the internal one onto the chancel when he returns from putting the collection away. It's a Yale lock, so he only has to slip the catch. The second door is on the other side of the vestry. It lets out onto the churchyard, and serves the belfry staircase as well as the vestry itself. The staircase comes down beside the door. People using it don't need to come into the vestry, but they're visible from it."

"This second door's always locked, you said, sir. And the door to the boiler house in the basement is immediately under it . . . outside . . . down some steps. But that's never locked." The sergeant looked up from his notebook, his brow furrowed. "You mentioned that the bell ringers leave by the external vestry door, sir."

"When they've finished ringing, before matins and evensong, yes. But that's when the services are starting, not ending. The vicar doesn't care to have all eight of them trouping out through the church at that point. Neither do I. Unseemly as well as unsupportive."

"There's no bell ringing before the eight o'clock service, sir?"

"No. Too many townspeople object to being woken up so early."

"And the bell ringers don't attend any of the services?"

Canon Crawley stopped pacing, and, with feet together, rocked forward onto his toes, then back onto his heels. "Sadly, no," he said with a sigh that mourned the shortcomings of others. "They tell me their worship is in their ringing. They could be right, I suppose." He stared up at the ceiling as if expecting a heavenly revelation in the matter.

"They spend more time in the bally Mason's Arms than they do in the church," said the major sourly, blowing a good deal of smoke in the sergeant's direction. "That's where they go, in a body, as soon as they stop ringing."

"In a body, sir? You mean all eight of them?"

"That's right. They're all long gone before the time we're concerned with, and the door locked behind them."

"That's a Yale lock too, sir? Like the other?" The major nodded, and Jones ticked something in his book before continuing. "And

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the eight-o'clock service is the only one where you're not there to put the collection in the safe?"

"Yes." Probe-Hyslop fingered the centre parting of his glossy hair, which he wore brushed very flat. "I can't be at all the services, and we're an officer short at the moment. The other churchwarden had to resign. Pressure of outside work." He fixed the chimer clock on the mantelpiece with a defiant expression, as though daring it to announce that the other man had resigned because he couldn't get on with Clarence Probe-Hyslop.

"So Mr. Moxton has a key to the safe same as you and the vicar, sir?"

"Correct, Sergeant."

"But you haven't mentioned our plan to him, sir?" Jones glanced from Probe-Hyslop to Canon Crawley.

"Good God . . . I mean, certainly not," the major answered, too keenly for the vicar, who simply nodded his regretful confirmation.

The major's unguarded exclamation confirmed the policeman's impression that he didn't trust the curate. "Like I said, the fewer who know, the better," Jones cautioned. "So if we could keep it just between the three of us? That's for the time being. As we're told in scriptures, 'A fool uttereth all his mind: but a wise man keepeth it in till afterwards.' That's Proverbs twenty-nine, verse eleven. Very applicable in the present case." He smiled encouragingly at the others before continuing. "So the verger's always at both main services, Vicar?"

"Yes. And a thoroughly conscientious verger he's been over more than . . . five years. Yes, he came in the summer of 1926," the canon responded vigorously. "He also polishes the brasses and helps with the cleaning of the church. He used to stoke the boiler as well, but that had to stop in October of this year, after he was off for two weeks. Bad heart, d'you see?"

"Who took on the stoking, sir?"

"A keen lad called Tobin. Eric Tobin," said the major. "Makes a better job of it, too. Far better. He's a gardener's boy at a big house on the edge of the town. Comes in every weekday, before and after his ordinary work. On Sundays he arrives well before the two main services. He lights and stokes the chancel stove then, too. For extra heat. We're paying him ten shillings a week through the winter. Worth every penny."

"Was that deducted from Mr. Rubb's money, sir?"

"Of course. We're not a charity, what?" This time the major noticed Jones's tight-lipped smile. "I mean, we have a budget

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for church maintenance, and we have to keep within it."

"But Mr. Rubb's income is ten shillings smaller than it used to be?"

"Yes. And four or five pounds a week better than it used to be, if he's been helping himself from the collection plates."

"Quite so, sir."

The vicar sighed loudly and turned about from examining a framed sepia reproduction of *The Light of the World* hanging near the window. "We've yet to prove he's been doing that," he said. "In the matter of the stoking, Tobin does a better job because he's used to manual work. Alfred Rubb is scarcely a labourer by background. He used to be a bank clerk before he lost his job."

"He was dismissed, sir?"

"Suh-suh-certainly not. He was simply laid off at the start of the slump. That's why he's so good with money. I mean, with business generally," he added quickly, after Probe-Hyslop gave a very audible snort. "He's a widower. Lives with his married daughter, quite close to the church. I don't know what St. Oswald's would do without him, I really don't." He pulled out his aged swivel desk chair and subsided into it, much to the relief of Probe-Hyslop, who had been irritated by his prowling.

"Could I ask how much Mr. Rubb is actually paid, sir?" Jones asked, with studied inconsequence.

The vicar, who wasn't sure, looked at Probe-Hyslop, who replied: "Two pounds five shillings a week."

The sergeant made a wan expression, licked the lead of his pencil, and made a note in his book. "A reasonable enough stipend, even for such a paragon, I suppose," he said.

"Others in this country manage on less," the affluent Probe-Hyslop answered stiffly, suspecting irony.

"Indeed they do, sir. Except that . . . opportunity is servant to temptation, and a handmaiden to the avaricious," the Welshman propounded, his voice rising in a crescendo, and so portentously that Probe-Hyslop assumed he was quoting from the Bible again. The vicar figured he wasn't, but then, as if to confuse them both, the sergeant added, " 'And the life of the poor is the curse of the heart,' Ecclesiasticus thirty-eight, verse eighteen—"

"Verse 19," Canon Crawley amended, testily for him, but he was finding the other man's sententious scripturising tiresome.

"Well done, sir," said Jones unabashed, as if he had been testing the vicar. "Just a few last points, about Mr. Rubb's movements. What time does he get to the church on Sundays?"

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"An hour before the two main services," said the vicar immediately. "He's never at the eight o'clock, but he's very careful to see things are in order for the eleven and six o'clock."

"And when does he open the vestry door for the bell ringers, Vicar?"

"I believe he lets them in at ten-fifteen in the morning, and five-fifteen in the evening. Although ringing doesn't start until the half-hour. Of course, the ringers can come in through the main door of the church at other times if they want, but since I've insisted they must leave by the vestry door, they've taken to arriving that way as well."

"And Eric Tobin?"

The vicar shrugged. "He brings a hod of anthracite up from the cellar, and through the vestry, at just after ten, and again just after five. That's after he's coked up the main boiler."

"Ah, so Mr. Rubb is in the vestry that early to open the door for him, Vicar?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Does Tobin attend the services?"

"No. I believe he's a Baptist."

"Indeed?" The policeman looked as if he was about to provide some illustrative piece of scripture featuring, perhaps, a deserving Samaritan, but after the earlier correction thought better of it. Instead he asked: "Tomorrow, Christmas Eve, is a Tuesday, but the carol service will be at six, like evensong on a Sunday?"

"Yes. And the services on Christmas Day will be the same as on a Sunday."

"Well, I hope we'll have this business over by then, sir."

"And you'll have two pounds' worth of marked half-crowns for me to be put in the collection, Sergeant?" asked Probe-Hyslop.

"Yes, sir. Sixteen in all. You're still sure it's half-crowns you've been losing?"

"We have to assume so, yes. Anyone stealing from the plates would go for them. Each one is worth sixpence more than a two-shilling piece, a florin," he completed, stating the obvious. "There used to be thirty or more half-crowns in the collections at matins and evensong. Now it's down to less than a dozen."

Canon Crawley sighed. "And you intend to . . ."

"They think poor Rubb's been palming money from the collection. So the police are putting marked half-crowns in the plates at the carol service tomorrow, then they're going to corner him after-

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wards. Make him empty his pockets. Daddy's said Mummy and I mustn't tell anyone. But I know it's all right to tell you, G. G.," Priscilla Crawley, the canon's youngest, unmarried daughter was saying, around the time the meeting in the vicarage was ending. Her head and neck were thrust forward, and making up-and-down movements, as if she were doing the breaststroke, except she was walking, not swimming, beside her confidant, the Reverend Geoffrey Gilbert Moxton, known to his intimates as G. G.

Priscilla was gauche and lanky, with bobbed, mousy hair stuffed into a beret; big, innocent blue eyes and a sharp patrician nose above a generous mouth. Her strong arms, presently enveloped in a heavy, wet green mackintosh, were failing, as always, to keep their boisterous swinging in time with the long strides of her well-shaped legs. She and her companion were moving energetically through the rain on the river path, heading back towards the town.

What Priscilla lacked in poise she made up in enthusiasm. She loved G. G. with an intensity that transcended everything else in her twenty-year-old world, but had never dared tell him so. Happily, the tall, muscular young cleric, whose horsey face complemented his initials, felt about Priscilla much as she felt about him. But since his earnings were not much larger than those of the St. Oswald's verger, he hadn't presumed to declare his love either, for fear she would assume it amounted to a proposal of marriage. There was no current prospect of G. G. getting married, certainly not while he was maintaining his frail and indigent mother in a private nursing home.

The couple had been checking the condition of a badger set discovered by Priscilla in the summer. It was badgers that had first drawn them together.

"Why are they picking on Rubb?" G. G. questioned, disturbed that this was the first he had heard of the matter.

"Because the money's been disappearing after he's taken it to the clergy vestry."

"But plenty of people have access to the vestry besides him."

"Not when the collection plates are in there, because both doors are locked."

G. G. scowled. "One of the ringers may have been hiding in the ringing chamber."

"But they always leave together before the service starts."

G. G. rubbed his manly chin, which was rather wet from the rain. "Someone else could be hiding up there."

"But there's nowhere to hide. No cupboard or anything."

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"There's the bell chamber one level up."

Priscilla shook her head vigorously. "Anyone hiding up there would have to be in place before the bell ringers arrived, and Daddy says no one could stand there while the ringing goes on. Not without going deaf, or mad."

"I suppose that's right. So they're saying the vestry's really a locked room. Except Rubb. . . ." He paused. "But it can't be Rubb. I know it can't," he ended with such insistence it almost suggested he knew who it could be. He pulled the frayed, turned-up collar of his topcoat tighter over his equally worn muffler.

Forty minutes later the rain had stopped, but there was a rising east wind and the moon was providing fitful illumination between scurrying clouds. Sergeant Jones was standing on the wide pathway that led from the big lych gate on Church Street to the main door of the church. He was listening to the church bells when he saw a hatless, strapping lad enter the churchyard through a smaller gate further down the street. The lad went directly to the church tower, which was offset on the north side of the building, at the end of the nave. He then descended the steps beside the vestry door at the tower base, and the wind carried the rasping noise of a bolt opening before he disappeared from sight. Jones rightly assumed the newcomer to be Eric Tobin, who reappeared shortly afterwards, whistling "Good King Wenceslas" as he hurried back to the street, without ever entering the church.

When the bell ringing ceased, the policeman moved through the gravestones and stationed himself on the narrow path the lad had used. As he expected, the bell ringers soon emerged in a group from the vestry door—or seven of them did. The eighth followed nearly a minute later, pulling the door shut behind him. Jones heard the click of the lock closing.

"I've been listening to your bells. Beautiful peal," he said, as the eighth bell ringer drew abreast of him.

"We've only been having a short practice this evening," the man answered. "Wait till tomorrow night, before the carol service." He was a short, burly fellow, with sunken, calculating eyes of the kind that, in a professional way—and to be on the safe side—Jones usually took to indicate guilt, until innocence was proved.

"Your teammates are ahead of you."

"Because I had to change my shoes. I like to ring in plimsolls. Anyway, the others won't have got further than the public bar of

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the Mason's Arms over the road." The speaker fixed an appraising stare on Jones. "You a campanologist as well?"

"Not really. I just like the sound of bells."

"Welsh, aren't you? Don't get many Welshmen around here. You don't live locally?"

"No, no. Just visiting over the holiday." If he had been local, the sergeant wondered if the man would have tried to recruit him as a ringer—or whether the last question had exposed a suspicion of his being a policeman, by a character with something to hide.

Jones's reply had been fairly close to the truth. He was based in Worcester, ten miles away. The small King's Minsted police force didn't include CID officers on its strength. He was planning to catch the 6:50 bus back, in twenty minutes from now. The tour the major had given him of the empty church had been extremely brief. Since then he had been to the local police station to make some arrangements for the next day.

"Merry Christmas," he called after the retreating eighth bell ringer. The salutation wasn't returned.

When the churchyard was empty, the sergeant, armed with a pocket flashlight, made quick examination of the ground between the vestry door and the little street gate. He also went down the steps and looked inside the boiler room. He picked up a number of small objects during his foraging and deposited them in one of the unused envelopes he carried about him. Several of his bullet-sized finds seemed to give him especial satisfaction.

When the internal church lights were extinguished, Jones had ceased his searchings and stationed himself in the street by the big lych gate. "I wonder if you could help me?" he asked, doffing his hat to the slightly built, elderly man who had shortly emerged from the porch of the darkened church.

"I will if I can," said the man. He had moved down the wide pathway at a slow but dogged pace, a walking stick in his gloved right hand. Of medium height, he was wearing a bowler hat and a dark-coloured wool overcoat, both of which had seen better days. His steel-rimmed spectacles had been mended with solder at the bridge. Altogether, he didn't look like someone who had tripled his income over the previous few months, but appearances could deceive. "Is it something to do with St. Oswald's? I'm the verger," he said.

"Well, there's lucky for me. I wanted to know the time of the carol service tomorrow."

"Six o'clock. Oh, that's very kind of you. Thank you." The eyes behind the glasses evinced genuine gratitude as the speaker

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accepted a Woodbine cigarette from the packet the sergeant proffered. "I'm supposed to be cutting back on gaspers, but since it's Christmas." He lit the cigarette from the match his benefactor was shielding in cupped hands, and which also illumined the verger's gaunt and deathly pale face.

"Has a service just finished?" asked the sergeant.

"No, but I had to be here for the bell ringers. For their practice. And to see the church is locked for the night, and ready for tomorrow. We'll be decorating it first thing. The vicar doesn't like that being done before Christmas Eve. Quite right, of course. So will you be joining us for the carols, sir?"

"I hope so. I've still got business to clear up in town. Right now I'm aiming to catch the next bus back to Worcester."

"Then I'll walk along with you. I live just this side of the bus station. That's if you'll put up with my dawdling steps."

The policeman smiled. "I've got a quarter of an hour in hand, and you can make sure I take the right turnings. Now that it's dark, I feel like 'I have been a stranger in a strange land.'"

"Ah, Moses said that when he named his son Gershom. Exodus, chapter two. I'm not sure of the verse."

"Neither am I," said Jones—but, instinctively, he was sure of Alfred Rubb.

It was just after seven o'clock on the following evening when the St. Oswald's carol service was drawing to a tuneful and tumultuous close. The voices of the choir, and of a record-sized congregation, in the flower- and holly-decked church, were lifting lustily to match the organ's triumphant rendering of "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing."

The collection had been completed during the singing of the first two verses of the carol, and received in the sanctuary by Canon Crawley. Immediately afterwards, the verger had taken the plates to the vestry. He had then returned to his stall in the chancel, closing, but not locking, the vestry door behind him.

It was as the last verse of the carol began that Rubb, departing from habit, purposely put down his hymn book and returned to the vestry, entering it with unusual alacrity.

Only the two clergymen in the sanctuary, and the members of the choir in the part of the chancel nearest to the vestry, heard the crash—then the verger's following anguished cry over the noise of the organ and the singing.

But almost everyone in the church watched in astonishment as

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the Reverend G. G. Moxton sprang into action from his own position in the sanctuary, vaulting the communion rail and pounding after Rubb through the door.

Inside the vestry G. G. first came upon an upset collection plate, its contents spread in all directions, and beyond that, the verger's prone body on the floor, the side of his forehead smeared with blood, his right arm stretched out in the direction of the door to the churchyard, and nearly touching it. There were two half-crowns lying beside his open palm.

G. G. knelt beside the body and was hugely relieved to see Rubb's eyelids flicker, then half open. The verger followed this with an expression of recognition and the breathless exhortation: "After him! After him!"

The curate jumped for the outside door and pulled it open. But his further progress was blocked by the solid figure of Sergeant Jones on the step outside.

"I'm from the police," said the sergeant, holding his ground.

"So didn't you catch whoever came out?" demanded G. G.

"Nobody's come out, sir. What's happened to Mr. Rubb?" He pushed past G. G. to the dazed verger, who had pulled himself into a sitting position. "Right, sir," he said to the curate, "look after the injured, will you, while I arrest our thief?" He turned to the belfry steps and began to mount them to the sound, from within the church, of a great "Amen."

"You said you found the vital clue yesterday, Sergeant," said the vicar later, sipping tea in his study with Jones, Probe-Hyslop, G. G., and Priscilla, who had brought in the tea things on a tray.

"That's right, sir. A pair of clues, to be exact. Two little bungs of compressed natural moss." He placed the two small objects on the vicar's desk. "One was at the bottom of the boiler-room steps. The other was just inside the door. Chucked away by Eric Tobin when he'd done with them last Sunday, I expect. There were others too. Older ones. The pair he used tonight we found in his trousers pocket when we searched him at the station. Marvellous stuff, pressed moss. Makes the best earplugs, by far. They'll even muffle the roar of a big gun, fired at close range. I recognised the plugs straightaway. We used them in Flanders, till the greenery gave way to mud. We relied on cotton wool after that."

"Ah yes." Probe-Hyslop voiced agreement, although his nine months' war service in the Pay Corps had all been spent at Aldershot Barracks.

"Don't suppose many people would use moss for making

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earplugs nowadays," mused the vicar.

"A gardener's boy would," said the sergeant. "And it was my wondering for what reason that set me on the right track."

"So that's how Tobin endured being in the bell chamber, a floor above the ringers?" said G. G.

"No doubt," answered the policeman. "It's where he went twice every Sunday, after taking the anthracite through to the chancel stove. He went up before the ringers arrived, when people thought he'd left already. He stayed there for the ringing, nipped down the stairs during the last hymn, waited till Mr. Rubb had brought in the collection, helped himself to a handful of half-crowns, and nipped back up again. Nice steady income he had going there, too, till he got too greedy and Mr. Probe-Hyslop noticed the shortage of half-crowns."

"He must have had a terrible shock when Rubb appeared in the vestry a second time tonight," put in Priscilla, while pressing G. G. to another Marie biscuit.

"Didn't we all. Or most of us," remarked the sergeant pointedly.

"But why didn't Tobin make a run for it to the churchyard instead of going back to the belfry staircase?"

"Partly force of habit, miss, and partly because it was quicker than getting the door open. He hoped Mr. Rubb hadn't had time to see who he was, or where he was heading, before he'd thrown the plate at his head." He turned to the vicar. "I suppose it was you, sir, who told Mr. Rubb he was suspected?"

"No, it was me. Just before the service," the curate intervened.

"And it was me who snitched to G. G., after Daddy told me," Priscilla admitted, chin up, tone impenitent. She firmly intended to marry G. G. (which she did after his mother recovered and married the owner of the nursing home), and she knew already that she could never keep any secrets from him.

"Well, since Mr. Rubb is expected to recover, there's no real harm done," said Jones magnanimously. "Lucky, that. The blow could have killed him, and then we'd have had a murder on our hands for Christmas." He made a pained face at the unseasonable thought. "He won't be at the services tomorrow, of course. Which reminds me, it's time I was going." He picked up his hat. "Well, a happy Christmas to all. And remember, only he who sins by defiling the feast deserveth to sojourn in the lonely pit," he completed, thinking of Eric Tobin.

"Very appropriate," said Probe-Hyslop. "Another quotation from the Bible?"

"No, no," said the Welshman, cheerfully. "I just made it up." ●

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HAPPY CHRISTMAS, DARLING—AND GOODBYE

by Simon Brett

"We're going to kill him," Natalie announced.

Trevor looked shocked. "Kill George? But—"

"Well, come on, he's never going to divorce me. How else can you and I be together—forever?"

"Things're okay like they are now . . . aren't they?" Trevor suggested tentatively. "We see each other every day as it is."

But his objection was quickly blasted away. "It's not just being together that matters. We need George's money."

Trevor bridled. "I'm sorry I don't make more. They keep saying the recession in building's over, but I don't see any signs of it. In a year or two perhaps things'll pick up, and I'll be able to keep you in the manner to which you've become accustomed."

Natalie's hand was instantly stroking his thigh, soothing away the childlike hurt in his voice. "I'm not criticising you, darling. You're everything I've ever wanted in a man."

He was. Ten years younger than her, with the easy strength of a manual worker. Dark curly hair, brown eyes. Sometimes Natalie couldn't believe her luck.

Trevor was pretty happy with what he saw, too. He liked older women. He knew the blondness of her hair was assisted, but that, and the fine tracery of lines which spread around her

After receiving a degree from Oxford in 1967, the only work British author Simon Brett could find was as a department store Santa (p. 116). The job inspired his first (unpublished) mystery; he went on, of course, to become one of the genre's stars. Mr. Brett's latest Charles Paris mystery, *Sicken and So Die*, is out from Scribners this month.

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eyes when she smiled, only added to her appeal.

"All I want from George," Natalie continued, "is his money. God knows, I deserve some payoff for all those years I've put up with being married to that sexless wimp. And I want *us* to be able to spoil ourselves a bit. I hate having to think about scrimping and saving all the time."

"But there must be another way. Does he have to be killed?"

"Oh yes." Natalie nodded decisively. "He has to be killed. Down here at the cottage. Over Christmas."

It was not an unusual triangle. So far as Natalie Marshall was concerned, her marriage had been dead in the water for a long time. When they'd first met, George had bowled her over by the force of his devotion, and in the numbness which followed the suicide of her first husband, Robert, Natalie had been easily persuaded to accept George's proposal of marriage. After the wedding, however, she had discovered that, though her new husband's protestations of love continued unabated, they found little physical expression. George Marshall was just not very interested in sex. In marrying Natalie, he had achieved the possession he coveted, but his desire for her seemed to be fulfilled by the fact of ownership alone.

So Natalie, frustrated, bored, and forty, had fallen like a stone for Trevor Roache when the younger man came to refurbish the bathroom of the Marshalls' country cottage in West Sussex. Conveniently, he was their next-door neighbour, and indeed their only near neighbour. Conveniently, his wife had just walked out on him after ten years of marriage. Less conveniently, she'd left him with two children of eight and six. Still, you couldn't have everything, and Natalie was extremely satisfied with what she did have. After fifteen years of her husband's minimal interest in sex, Trevor's uncomplicated and dependable lust was like a breath of fresh air.

She made no attempt to hide the affair. She knew she had found the man she'd spent her life searching for, and she presented George with the facts the evening of the day that she and Trevor had first gone to bed together. Her husband was, as ever, infuriatingly reasonable about it. He still loved Natalie, he announced, but he would not stand in the way of her happiness.

Since selling the family engineering firm at a large profit, George no longer worked, and he already spent much of his time in their London flat. What he did when he was up there Natalie neither knew nor cared. She never worried that her husband

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might be unfaithful to her. No woman was going to want anyone as short and bald and boring and passionless as fifty-eight-year-old George Marshall.

When he was informed of his wife's affair he announced without rancour that he'd stay in London and not come back to the cottage until "this thing's burnt itself out."

For Natalie, who found each new encounter with Trevor only added fuel to the flames of her passion, this was the ideal solution. She had the pretty flint-faced cottage to herself, George had left her the Volvo, and her lover's house was only fifty yards away. Nor did Trevor's children get in the way of their affair; they held little interest for him, and he farmed them out whenever possible to school friends whose parents took pity on his single state. No, in many ways Natalie's situation offered her everything she could have dreamed of.

Except for the money. Not that George exactly kept her short. He still looked after the domestic bills and gave her a generous housekeeping allowance, but the awareness of that huge fortune of his that she wasn't sharing niggled away at Natalie like a rotten tooth.

For a while she nursed hopes of getting a divorce and, with it, a substantial financial settlement from her husband. Though George was entirely blameless in the situation, Natalie knew what could be achieved by the right sort of expensive lawyer. She wrote to her husband more than once, itemising the benefits of making their separation permanent and official. But George, usually so mild and malleable, proved stubbornly resistant to the idea of divorce.

His response at first just irritated, but gradually came to infuriate her. She felt a mounting sense of injustice. If he'd wanted her, it might have been different. As it was, George's attitude was pure dog in the manger. He had no use for her himself, but he didn't want anyone else to have her. He still thought of his wife as his property, and George Marshall was very possessive about his property.

It was from Natalie's sense of injustice that the idea of killing her husband was born. At first just a casual, almost whimsical, fantasy, it quickly hardened into a positive intention. George's death would answer all her problems. It would be much better than divorce; if they were still married when he died, his jubilant widow would collect the lot.

Natalie Marshall began to plan her husband's murder.

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On Christmas Eve she rang the flat at a time when she knew George would be out. Regular as clockwork—and about as interesting—in his habits, he always went out at two in the afternoon for what he insisted on calling his "constitutional." In Sussex it was a walk through the woods, in London through the park; in both cases he arrived back exactly forty minutes after his departure.

Natalie knew there was only one message that would bring George down to the cottage, and that was the one she left on the answering machine. She manufactured quite a convincing sob in her voice as she spoke the words.

"George, darling, it's me, calling at two-fifteen. You were right. My affair with Trevor's come to an end. And he's . . . taking it very badly. I'm . . . I'm really worried about what he might do, George. Look, after what's happened between us, I know I've no right to ask you this . . . but is there any chance you could come down . . . today? And if you do come . . . a purely domestic detail, but the ventilation tube on the tumble-dryer's broken . . . could you try and get a replacement? I'm sorry about these last few months, but . . . please come down. I'll try to make everything up to you—and give you a happy Christmas, darling."

She felt confident she'd judged the effect just right. The sudden switch to the domestic detail of the tumble-dryer was a bit abrupt, but it had been necessary. And George's love of do-it-yourself was so strong she felt sure he'd respond to the appeal.

When she'd left her message, she switched on the answering machine at the cottage and sat by the phone listening impassively when her husband rang back at two forty-five. The boring ordinariness of his voice, as ever, set her teeth on edge.

"Hello, Natalie darling, it's me. I can't tell you how delighted I was to hear your message. I've just got to get some stuff together—I'll pick up the tumble-dryer part, don't worry—and I'll be with you as soon as possible. I should be able to catch the four-twenty train. I'll get a cab from the station and be with you about six-thirty. Darling, this is the most amazing surprise I'm ever likely to have."

Don't you believe it, darling—you've got an even more amazing one coming, thought Natalie with a grim little smile, and then went off to type a letter on George's word processor.

George Marshall looked thoughtful after he had put the phone down. Then he did what was necessary to the answering machine

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and started to get together the things that he would need for a Christmas visit to his wife.

Neatly filed in his desk were all the letters that Natalie had written to him since they separated. He rifled through them, his eyes snagging on hurtful phrases. ". . . and I never want to see you again . . ." ". . . so far as I'm concerned, anything there ever was between us has long gone . . ." ". . . why can't you just accept that the whole thing's over? . . ."

George Marshall made a careful selection of the letters and put them in his pocket. He packed a few clothes for himself and put in a pair of Natalie's stiletto-heeled shoes which she'd left in the flat after some long-forgotten London function.

He got a cab to a nearby shopping centre. It was crowded with panicked last-minute present-buyers. Carols washed over the public areas. Weary Santas rang hearty handbells. Groups of giggling secretaries and raucous young men meandered in the boozy aftermath of office parties.

George knew exactly where to go for the tumble-dryer ventilation hose, and knew exactly which model was required. All kinds of machinery fascinated him. He then went on to a supermarket where he loaded up with a packet of mince pies, a pot of brandy butter, a bottle of champagne, and one of brandy. Finally, he entered a lingerie shop and purchased a sexy silk basque, suspender, and stocking set. He hailed another cab and reached Victoria Station in time to catch the four-twenty train.

There was a Father Christmas costume hanging in the hall of Trevor's cottage when Natalie called round at half-past four. "Kids always insist I do the full number when I fill their stockings," he explained. "Have to dress up for them. It's daft—I swear they're never awake to see me when I'm in the kit. Still, the little pains take it all very seriously, leave out a glass of brandy and mince pie for Santa, carrot for the reindeer. They like their little rituals."

"Where are they now?" asked Natalie.

"Round at a friend's. Being brought back nine-ish."

"Did you find that sleeping draught?"

"Uh-huh." He produced a bottle. "My wife used to give it to the little blighters when they were teething. Didn't have much effect on them after a while, they built up an immunity, but it's powerful stuff. I tried a spoonful once when I had toothache and it knocked me out for, like, twelve hours."

"Good," said Natalie.

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As she reached out for the bottle, Trevor took her hand and drew her close to him. She saw the familiar spark of lust in his brown eyes.

"Later," she said, planting a little kiss on his nose. "We'll have earned it later."

When she got back to her cottage, Natalie once again dialled the number of the London flat. As soon as she heard George's voice on the answering machine, she used the remote function to play back any messages that might have been left. There were none. Good, she thought, that meant he'd wiped hers.

She put the phone down, waited a moment, then pressed the Last Number Redial. At the tone she left another message on the machine.

"George, this is Natalie. I'm begging you, please don't come to the cottage. I know you say you're in a terrible state, but your coming down here is not going to help either of us. Our marriage is over, you know it, and no melodramatic gestures from you are going to make any difference to that. I love Trevor, and you're just going to have to accept that fact. Please see reason and stay in London over Christmas. Goodbye."

The children's sleeping draught had a sickly fruity flavour, but the brandy's taste was more powerful, and smothered it. Natalie mixed the proportions carefully in the brandy bottle and then got out the ingredients to make brandy butter. George had a sweet tooth; he could never resist brandy butter.

Her husband felt almost gleeful as he got out at the familiar station and felt the sting of frost on his face. There were few passengers, not the commuter hordes that would have been travelling most other weekdays. But now most working people seemed to assume Christmas Eve was an automatic part of their holiday entitlement. George did not approve of that kind of thing. He'd grafted hard all his working life and had earned his current leisure and prosperity. He was determined to enjoy them both to the full.

In high good spirits he got into a waiting cab and gave its driver the familiar address. Could be just like old times, thought George Marshall.

At a quarter past six, Natalie went up to the bathroom and washed her face with soapy water. Deliberately, she kept her eyes

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open. The soap stung like mad, but left a satisfactory redness around her lids. She dampened a handkerchief and tucked it in her sleeve, then dishevelled her hair a little. The face reflected in the bathroom mirror looked suitably traumatised. When she heard the doorbell ring downstairs, she added a dash of contrition to her expression.

George stood on the doorstep, blinking through his spectacles. The coloured Christmas lights she'd draped over the porch were reflected from his bald head. He looked even shorter than Natalie remembered. And she'd forgotten how much she hated the sight of him.

"I didn't use my keys. Didn't want to startle you."

"That was very thoughtful."

Natalie was still for a moment, swallowing down the distaste for what she had to do. Then, as if impulsively, with a little strangled sob in her voice, she reached forward to enfold her husband's plump shoulders. "Oh, George, can you ever forgive me?"

"Yes, of course," he replied, as if he were soothing an overexcited pet. "Of course I can."

He looked up to where a sprig of silver-ribboned mistletoe hung from the porch light. "Well, there's an invitation," he chuckled, as his mouth nuzzled towards hers. "Happy Christmas, darling."

Natalie steeled herself for the touch of his lips. She had forgotten how repellent and sluglike they were, but managed to simulate some enthusiasm in her response. Then she drew back and looked at her husband, her face a mask of suffering and apology.

"Happy Christmas, darling," said Natalie Marshall. "Come in and let me get you a brandy."

Except for the detail that Natalie had decided to murder her husband, it was almost as if George Marshall had never been away. As soon as he arrived at the cottage that Christmas Eve, he instantly took over domestically, scurrying straight into the kitchen with his carrier bag of supermarket goodies to rustle up a snack for the two of them. It was with difficulty that Natalie dissuaded him from immediately fitting the new ventilation hose onto the tumble-dryer. George Marshall was back in his own home and back into his role as boring homemaker. Every moment she spent in his company, Natalie hated him more and was more aware of the differences between her husband and her lover, Trevor.

Still, I don't have to put up with it for long, she comforted her-

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self. By this time tomorrow, George will be dead, I'll be in line to inherit all his money, and there'll be nothing in the way of Trevor's and my happiness.

She followed George into the kitchen and indicated the bottle of brandy on the dresser. Her intention had been to fill her husband up with the drugged fluid as quickly as possible, but George's dutiful domesticity made this impossible. He said he'd settle down with a drink once he'd knocked up their little snack. Natalie must be feeling dreadful after what'd happened. She should just put her feet up, and he'd sort out everything in the kitchen. He ushered his wife back into the sitting room, placed another log on the fire, sat her in an armchair, and put a glass of champagne into her hand.

Natalie sipped her drink and bided her time. The delay did not worry her unduly. She still felt confident her plans would work. There was no danger that she herself might inadvertently get drugged. Natalie never drank brandy—it was George's favourite tipple—and her constant dieting, even more important now her body had Trevor to admire it, ruled out the possibility of her touching the brandy butter.

She switched on the television and remoted quickly through the channels, but nothing caught her attention. Jovial game-show hosts in Santa suits did not fit her current mood and preoccupations. The traditional red costume and beard did give her an idea, though. She and Trevor enjoyed dressing up for sex. Maybe that night she'd make love to Father Christmas. The thought gave her a warm anticipatory glow.

George soon came bustling in with a loaded tray. Boringly predictable, he'd done scrambled egg on toast for them. More satisfactorily from Natalie's point of view, he'd also brought in a plate of mince pies and a large dish of brandy butter. The doctored bottle of brandy and a balloon glass were also on the tray.

"Oh, got something for you," George remembered just before he sat down. He disappeared into the hall for a moment, then returned, carrying his briefcase.

"What is it?" asked Natalie, her curiosity aroused.

George winked mysteriously. "Something you'll like very much. Show you after supper."

Then, finally, he uncorked the brandy bottle and poured a generous measure into the balloon. He raised it to his wife. "To us, Natalie. To us."

She lifted her champagne glass to his, though she could not bring herself to echo his words.

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While he ate, George talked, unworried by the spray of crumbs from his mouth. Natalie had forgotten how disgusting she'd always found this habit of his. Still, that was just another detail which would very soon cease to be a problem for her.

"So what happened with Trevor?" her husband asked, a fleck of yellow egg beading the corner of his mouth.

"It came to an end," Natalie lied. "I just realised it wasn't working. I fell out of love with him, I suppose, and then it seemed incredible that I ever had loved him. When I came to my senses, I hated myself for what I had done to you. I knew the whole episode had been a ghastly mistake, so I told Trevor it was over."

"Ah." George nodded sagely.

"And you're fully at liberty to say what you like. God knows, you have the right."

"What do you expect me to say?"

"I don't know. I suppose 'I told you so' would be appropriate."

George Marshall reached across and took his wife's hand. The touch of his flesh felt to her like a thawing chicken breast. "I'm not going to say anything like that," he confided. "I'm so delighted to have you back that nothing else matters."

Natalie managed a weak smile of gratitude.

"How did Trevor take it?" asked George.

She grimaced.

"You said on your phone message you were worried about what he might do. Do you mean you're afraid he might turn violent towards you?"

Natalie had prepared her answer to this question carefully. If George thought she was in danger, he might be capable of going round to confront Trevor. The last thing her plans required at that moment was heroics from her husband.

"Not violent towards me, no. I'm more worried he might turn his violence against himself." The thought of what she was saying almost made her laugh. Trevor was so uncomplicated, so full of animal vigour, that the idea of his entertaining even a moment's thought of suicide became ridiculous. Natalie began to enjoy embroidering the lie. "He was terribly cut up about the whole business . . . you know, with his wife having walked out so recently. I suppose he kind of thought I was his salvation. Certainly, the affair went much deeper with him than it did with me."

"So you're genuinely afraid he might try to kill himself?"

Natalie shrugged. "I hope not. I hope the thought of his two little kids'll stop him, but . . . yes, I have worried about it. He's

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very unstable," she concluded, secretly gleeful at the incongruity of her words.

"Dear, oh dear," said George. Then, to his wife's intense satisfaction, he poured another healthy top-up into his brandy glass. To her even greater satisfaction, he picked up a mince pie, lifted its pastry lid, and piled up the interior with brandy butter.

Speaking through flakes of puff pastry, George continued, "Don't you worry about a thing, darling. From what I remember of Trevor, I'd think he was an extremely unlikely candidate for suicide. As you say, he's got the kids to think of, apart from anything else. And, even if he did do something stupid, you shouldn't blame yourself. Suicide is the ultimate act of selfishness. No one else is ever to blame. It involves only the person who commits the act," he concluded pompously.

"Well, I hope you're right . . ." said Natalie, playing out her anxiety a little longer, and noting with satisfaction the sight of her husband decapitating a second mince pie and ladling in the brandy butter.

"Ooh now, your present . . ." George reminded himself. He crammed the whole of the pie into his mouth and picked up his briefcase. Holding it on his lap with the lid shielding its contents from his wife, he reached teasingly inside. "I don't think you'll ever guess what I've bought you. . . ."

Natalie certainly never would have done. She looked with dumb amazement at the silk lingerie set George proudly produced. Trevor enjoyed that sort of thing; she took pleasure in dressing up for their erotic encounters; but George had never shown interest in anything but the most traditional sex and not a great deal in that.

"Do you like them?" her husband prompted.

"Well, yes, but . . . why did you buy them for me?"

George winked roguishly. "I read an article in this magazine about how couples who've been married for a long time can . . . as it were, recharge their interest in each other."

Oh my God, thought Natalie, I'm not sure I can cope with this. But then, mercifully, on cue, George yawned.

She waited until he was snoring heavily. To be extra sure, she spoke to him and shook his plump form, but there was no response. Reassured, she went to the phone and told Trevor it was time she needed his help.

Briefly she had contemplated doing the job alone. Though he was chubby, George's lack of height meant that she could have

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carried him or dragged him without too much difficulty. But second thoughts decided her that she must enlist Trevor. It wasn't so much his physical strength she needed as the fact of his involvement. The murder would be their secret, a shared sacrament that would bind them even closer together. In the hopefully unthinkable eventuality of Trevor losing interest in her, Natalie could use the crime to blackmail him back into line.

Trevor was jumpy when he came round at her summons. He had raised no objections at the time she had spelled out her plans to him, but the reality of what they were about to do made him nervous. Natalie, on the other hand, was icily efficient and in control.

"Do we take him out straightaway?" asked Trevor tentatively.

She shook her head. "I'm just going to go through his pockets first. See there's nothing there that might spoil the picture we're trying to create."

There was nothing that spoiled the picture. Indeed, as she pointed out to Trevor, there was something that improved the picture considerably. "These are letters I wrote to him. Look." She pointed to the words. " '. . . so far as I'm concerned, anything there ever was between us has long gone . . .' 'why can't you just accept the whole thing's over? . . .' This is great—couldn't be better."

"Why're the letters torn?" asked Trevor.

"God knows. He probably started to get rid of them, but then couldn't bring himself to *lose any souvenir of me.*" She put the last five words into sardonic italics, then quickly reverted to the businesslike. "Right, the tumble-dryer hose is in a plastic bag in the hall. You fix that and then come back for him—okay? Got some gloves, have you?"

Trevor nodded, reached a pair of gardening gloves from his pocket, and put them on as he left the room.

He was back within five minutes and reached to pick up George's snoring body. "No, we'll do it together," said Natalie, also putting on gloves and picking up a rubber-covered torch. "You take one arm, I'll take the other."

George half-woke and mumbled something incoherent as the lovers lifted him out of his chair. His legs even helped them in a loose-limbed shuffle, as they guided him out into the frosty darkness. But he didn't regain consciousness.

Trevor had left the door of the detached garage open. The Volvo was in place. With surprising ease, they manhandled George into

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the driver's seat, where he slumped sideways against the headrest. He grunted a little as he settled, but still did not wake.

Natalie handed the torch to Trevor. "I'll just go and get the note and the bottles," she whispered.

While she was gone, Trevor ran the torch beam along the passenger side of the car to check his handiwork. One end of the tumble-dryer hose was firmly attached with insulating tape to the exhaust pipe. The other end led into the car, clamped in place by the nearly closed passenger-side front window.

Natalie returned and reached unsentimentally across her husband's body to place the near-empty bottles of brandy and sleeping draught on the seat beside him. Then she drew a folded sheet of paper from her pocket.

"What does it say?" asked Trevor.

She opened the letter and held it up to the torch beam.

> TO WHOEVER FINDS ME—and I hope it's you, Natalie. And I hope what you find will really hurt you, when you see what your cruelty has driven me to. I love you. I've always loved you, and the thought of you with someone else is just more than I can bear. I'm killing myself the same way that your first husband did—and that's deliberate. It's meant to hurt you—to make you realise what an unfeeling bitch you are. I hope the rest of your life is really miserable. I'm glad to be out of it.

Trevor looked up as he finished reading. "Pity it's not signed."

"I thought of pretending it was an insurance document or something and getting him to sign, but it wasn't worth the risk. And the police'd spot it if I tried to forge his signature."

Trevor nodded. He looked suddenly awkward, young, and frightened. "So . . . now . . . do we . . . ?"

"Yes," Natalie replied firmly. She reached a gloved hand into her pocket and took out George's bunch of keys. Briskly, she put one into the ignition and turned it. The engine fired first time.

"How long're you going to wait till you discover him?" asked Trevor.

"Till the morning." Natalie slammed the car door, led Trevor out of the garage, and closed its doors behind them.

He was trembling in the cold air as Natalie put her arms around him. "When did you say the kids get back?"

"Nine." He gulped. "Round nine."

"Good."

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"I'll have to be back then. They'll be very excited. Got to do my full Santa routine."

"Eat the mince pie and drink the brandy they leave out for him?"

"That's it."

"What about the carrot for the reindeer—you don't eat that too, do you?"

"Bin it. Have to be careful it's nowhere they might find it, mind. Spoil the whole boring charade, that would."

Though his words were light, Trevor was still quivering with shock. Natalie pressed her body against him and felt his infallible lust begin to replace the fear. "Come to bed. I've got some sexy new undies to show you." She chuckled throatily as she remembered something. "But first—go and put on your Father Christmas costume."

The dressing-up and the bond of their shared guilt brought their sexual pleasure to new heights. When Trevor slipped away at ten to nine, Natalie glowed with fulfillment, and with the knowledge that nothing could now stand in the way of their happiness. She slept surprisingly peacefully and deeply.

At eight o'clock the next morning, anyone who happened to be passing would have seen Natalie Marshall go out of her front door and cross to the garage as if to get the car out. They would have heard her catch her breath as she opened the garage doors, seen her dart in with a hand over her mouth to switch off the Volvo's engine. They would have heard a scream as she identified her husband's slumped body, and seen her rush in panic back into the house.

In fact, there was no one there to witness these events, but Natalie knew how important it was to go through the whole scenario correctly. And she knew how important it was to get the right note of shock and hurt into her voice when she rang the police to tell them that her husband was dead.

Inspector Jeavons looked across at the woman sobbing on the sofa in the cottage's expensively furnished sitting room. "And had he ever spoken about taking his own life?"

Natalie Marshall, giving the performance of her life, nodded in anguish. "Yes, I'm afraid he had. Particularly recently. Oh God, I feel so terrible about it."

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"It's only to be expected, Mrs. Marshall. Must be an awful shock for you."

"He meant it to hurt me, you know. Doing it right on my doorstep, right here."

"I wouldn't know about that," said the inspector stodgily. He paused. "When you went into the garage this morning, Mrs. Marshall, you didn't make any attempt to revive your husband . . . ?"

"No. He was obviously dead. And I couldn't stay in there—the whole place was full of fumes. Goodness knows how long he'd had the car running."

"I assume you didn't hear it being switched on or anything?"

She shook her head decisively. "You can't hear what's happening in the garage from inside the house. It could have been any time."

"Well, the police surgeon'll be examining the body now. And my other colleagues'll be checking out the garage. We'll know more details soon." The inspector selected his next words with delicacy. "Do you feel able to tell me why your husband might have wanted to kill himself?"

"Jealousy, I'm afraid—and despair. Our relationship was over. I'd fallen in love with someone else. He just couldn't come to terms with that."

"No." The inspector nodded sympathetically and was about to say something else when he heard the front door open. "Ah, that will be the forensic people, I imagine."

They both looked towards the sitting-room door. It opened, and with a breezy "Happy Christmas, darling!" in walked George Marshall.

All the colour drained from his wife's face. The rawness around her eyes, once again created by applications of soapy water, showed stark red in the white mask. "George . . ." she murmured in disbelief. "George . . ."

Her husband looked quizzically at their visitor. "Don't believe I've had the pleasure . . ."

The policeman reached out a formal hand. "Detective Inspector Jeavons."

"Oh yes? Some problem? Been a burglary locally, has there? I don't know, you'd think they'd have the decency to spare people over Christmas," George burbled on, "but then nobody seems to have any values in this country anymore. In the old days—"

"Excuse me," the inspector interposed, "but who are you?"

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"What, you don't know? Sorry, I'm George Marshall."

"This lady's husband?"

"Yes, that's right." The little man looked puzzled by the detective's incredulous reaction. "What's the matter?"

"Mrs. Marshall telephoned us this morning saying that you'd committed suicide in your garage."

It was George's turn to look incredulous. *"What?"*

"Your wife said you'd attached a tumble-dryer hose to the exhaust of your car and switched on the ignition."

"Good heavens! She must have been getting confused. That's how her first husband killed himself."

"Oh, really?" said Inspector Jeavons, with a hint of a raised eyebrow.

"But why on earth am I supposed to have committed suicide?" asked George in amazement.

"Mrs. Marshall said that you were in despair over her having taken another lover."

"Well, I was pretty cut up about it, yes, at the start, but that's all forgotten now. Natalie and I are back together again. *And how*—after last night!" He managed to imbue his last words with unambiguous salaciousness, which he then amplified. "Goodness, did she make me welcome—exotic lingerie, stiletto heels, the full number. It certainly felt like Christmas for me! Christmas and my birthday rolled into one!"

He chuckled, then, for the first time since he'd come into the room, looked directly at his wife. He could see how quickly Natalie's mind was working as she tried to produce the right reaction to her new circumstances. Any denial of what George was saying was likely to raise awkward questions from Inspector Jeavons about what had really happened the night before. For the time being, shocked silence remained her best policy.

"So you are saying, Mr. Marshall, that you spent last night here with your wife?"

"Yes. Sleeping in the same bed. Well, not sleeping all the time," George added with another vocal nudge.

Inspector Jeavons turned a stern gaze on Natalie. "So, Mrs. Marshall, have you been wasting police time? Did you make up this story of finding a body in your garage?"

She opened her mouth as if to reply, but then hesitated, uncertain which way to jump.

"So you haven't seen the supposed body, Inspector?" asked George.

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"No, I came straight in here to talk to Mrs. Marshall. My colleagues went to examine the garage."

"You'd've thought they'd've come straight back out again if they hadn't found anything in there . . . wouldn't you?" George observed casually.

It took a moment for the implications of his words to sink in, and the point registered more quickly with Natalie than with the inspector.

"Oh no!" she screamed, rising to her feet. "Oh my God, no!"

And, moving like a thing possessed, she rushed out of the cottage to the garage.

The police had taken Trevor's body out of the car and laid it on a sheet of plastic on the cement floor. Incongruously, he was dressed in his Father Christmas suit. His dead face was hideously congested and contorted.

Natalie threw herself down on the ground, taking up the stiff, cold body in her arms. Sobs shuddered through her frame. "The bastard!" she muttered. "The heartless, cruel bastard!"

The Scene of Crime team continued their investigations outside the cottage. A woman police constable comforted Natalie Marshall with sweet tea and sympathy in the kitchen, while in the sitting room Inspector Jeavons questioned her husband for background information about Trevor Roache's death. George didn't need any prompting; he was anxious to be as helpful as he could.

"Trevor was Natalie's lover, yes. He was the one we split up over. I suppose knowing we were back together again and that he had no more chance with Natalie must have made him do this dreadful thing."

"Did he strike you as a potentially suicidal type?"

"I didn't know him well—only met him a couple of times when he came here to do building work for us—but Natalie was clearly worried that he might do something like this."

"What makes you say that, Mr. Marshall?"

"She said as much in a message she left on my answering machine yesterday morning."

"Oh? Presumably that message would have been erased by now?"

"Well, . . ." George Marshall looked sheepish. "In normal circumstances it would have been, yes, but the fact is . . . As you know, our marriage wasn't going very well, and I did actually get to the

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point of consulting a solicitor about the possibility of divorce. He advised me to try and get some recordings of conversations with Natalie about Trevor and . . . Well, her phone message more or less fitted the bill, so I—it seems ridiculous now Natalie and I are back together again, but I did actually take the tape out of the answering machine and put in a new one."

"You wouldn't by any chance have that tape with you, Mr. Marshall?"

"Well, as it happens . . ." George reached down to his briefcase and produced the tape and a small cassette player.

The inspector listened to Natalie's message impassively, though his eyebrow twitched at the words, *"My affair with Trevor's come to an end. And he's . . . taking it very badly. I'm . . . I'm really worried about what he might do, George."*

When the message had ended, George Marshall said rather diffidently. "Actually, there is another tape. . . ."

"Oh?"

"Well, when Natalie summoned me down here last night, I thought we were in for some kind of confrontation, so I followed my solicitor's advice and . . . using this cassette player hidden in my briefcase . . . actually recorded a bit of our conversation. . . ."

"You'd better play it," said Inspector Jeavons quietly.

Again the detective tried not to show any reaction, but again was unable to suppress a flicker of interest when George's voice asked, *"So you're genuinely afraid he might try to kill himself?"* and Natalie's replied, *"I hope not. I hope the thought of his two little kids'll stop him, but . . . yes, I have worried about it. He's very unstable."*

"So . . ." the inspector said when the recording ended, "it does begin to look as if the victim was predisposed to suicide . . . particularly when your evidence is taken in conjunction with the letters we found in his pocket. . . ."

He held out a transparent folder through which scraps of torn letters were visible. As if he'd never seen them before, George read the words, *". . . so far as I'm concerned, anything there ever was between us has long gone . . ."*

"That is your wife's handwriting, is it, Mr. Marshall?"

George sighed. "Yes, I'm afraid it is. Hard not to feel for Mr. Roache, isn't it?"

"He also left a note." The inspector produced another transparent folder, through which could be seen a printed sheet which began, *"TO WHOEVER FINDS ME—and I hope it's you,*

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Natalie . . . " At the bottom of the page was scrawled in biro the name, "Trevor."

"Of course, we'll have to check the signature's genuine, but I don't have many worries on that score. No, Mr. Marshall, I'd say we've got an open-and-shut case of suicide here."

But through the afternoon a few details emerged which made the case look less open-and-shut. The signature on the suicide note was found to match no existing samples of Trevor Roache's handwriting; it began to look increasingly like a rather crude forgery.

Then there was the mud, grass, and cement dust found adhering to the back of the dead man's Father Christmas costume. These traces suggested that, rather than walking voluntarily to the garage and to his death, Trevor Roache had quite possibly been dragged there while unconscious.

What had rendered him insensible was quickly found. His children, before being taken into the care of their grandparents, confirmed that they had left out a glass of brandy and a mince pie for Father Christmas. No, they had not put any brandy butter in the mince pie. And yet the dead man's stomach was found to contain brandy butter, heavily laced with a sleeping draught. The police found some corresponding brandy butter, also drugged, in a supermarket pot in Natalie Marshall's fridge.

Marks on the frosty ground between Trevor's cottage and the Marshalls' garage doors supported the hypothesis that his body had been dragged across the intervening ground.

Most damning of all were the deep heel prints left by the person who had dragged him. They had been made by the sharp points of stiletto heels.

The police hadn't got quite enough to arrest her on the spot, but it was no surprise when they asked Natalie Marshall to accompany them to the station for further questioning. Before she was taken away, she was allowed a brief moment alone with her husband. They stood in the garden, out of earshot of the police, in the dusk of Christmas Day, the frosty air prickling at their cheeks and fairy lights twinkling overhead.

"You bastard!" Natalie hissed. "You won't get away with this."

George blinked mildly through his spectacles. "Oh, I think I will. You can't tell them what really happened without incriminating yourself for attempting to murder me."

"Attempted murder would get a lighter sentence than murder."

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"Sure. Well, that's a decision you'll have to make for yourself. Anyway, if you're already thinking of plea-bargaining, it looks like you've accepted what's going to happen to you . . . darling." He smiled an infuriating smile.

"God, I hate you!" Natalie seethed. "I'll tell the police how much I hate you."

"They'll think you're just saying that to divert suspicion. They have my word for it that we're reconciled . . ." He chuckled. ". . . and had wonderful sex last night to celebrate the fact."

"How did you do it, George?"

Her husband shrugged modestly. "I knew what you were planning. I had brought brandy and brandy butter with me, and while I was getting our scrambled egg last night, substituted mine for yours, putting most of your drugged stuff into the supermarket pot in the fridge. So I was eating ordinary brandy butter and drinking ordinary brandy."

"And what I destroyed last night was the supermarket stuff?"

George nodded cheerfully. "That's right. Then I just pretended to pass out and stayed that way, while you fetched Trevor and manhandled me into the garage. I knew it'd take awhile before the fumes in the car built up to noxious levels, so I stayed for five minutes after you'd closed the garage doors, then let myself out.

"All I had to do after that was wait till Trevor went back to his cottage and follow him. Through the window I watched him with his kids, saw them putting out the mince pie and brandy by the fireplace for Father Christmas. When he went up to put the kids to bed, I nipped in, replaced the brandy with some of your drugged stuff, and put a huge dollop of doctored brandy butter in the mince pie.

"Thereafter it was just a matter of waiting and watching. Eventually Trevor ate and drank the stuff. Pretty soon after that, he fell asleep, out cold in his armchair. I'd brought a pair of your stilettos with me for the purpose, and wore them as I dragged him across to the garage. The rest you know."

"Not all of it," Natalie objected. "I still swear it was your body I found in the car this morning."

"Oh yes. When I heard you getting up, I moved Trevor's body out—bit tricky, that, he was already stiff with rigor mortis, but I managed. I tucked him under the front of the Volvo and got into the driver's seat myself. I knew you wouldn't look too closely once you'd identified me. Then, as soon as you'd gone, I got out and put Trevor's body back in place."

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The light of hatred burned in Natalie's eyes as she stared at her husband. "But how? How did you know what I was planning?"

George smiled complacently. "Wasn't difficult. You've never had that much imagination, Natalie. As soon as I heard you mention the tumble-dryer hose on the answering machine, I knew exactly what your murder method would be." In response to her quizzical look, he went on, "Because it was exactly how your first husband died, wasn't it? Even down to the detail of using a tumble-dryer hose." George Marshall let out another gleeful chuckle. "I should know. I was the one who fixed that."

All colour drained from his wife's cheeks. "You? You killed Robert? You mean, it wasn't suicide?"

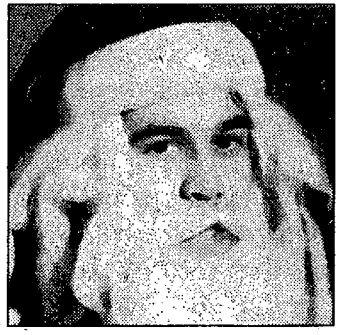
"No, of course it wasn't. You'd never have married me while he was alive, and I very much wanted you to marry me. Generally speaking, Natalie," he concluded smugly, "I get the things I want."

"But . . ." Now there was a pleading look in his wife's eyes. "Don't you still want me, George?"

"Oh no," he replied. "Not anymore. Not since you took up with Trevor. I found that very hurtful, you know, and I was determined to punish you for what you'd done to me. Now I've had my proper revenge, I'll give you that divorce you so wanted, darling. No percentage for me being married to someone who's in prison, is there?"

It was at that moment Inspector Jeavons came forward to lead Natalie Marshall to the waiting car.

From his sitting-room window, George Marshall watched the police convoy disappearing down the lane. He dialled his mistress's number. And when she answered, he said, "Happy Christmas, darling."



Simon Brett as department store Santa
Christmas 1967

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The Object Lesson

by W. H. Guernon

The adventure which I am about to relate holds a very special place in my recollections, for reasons which will presently become apparent. It began one Autumn afternoon, just as I was finishing an article deploring a recent series of daring and efficient thefts, totally undetected, and showing no signs of abating. My regret that there seemed little likelihood that the crimes would let up in the near future was not feigned, for I would rather have settled down, at least until the wolf, or, more accurately, the bailiff, was nearer the door. However, at this time there was no stopping L. A. Jeffars.

He seemed veritably drunk with success, as drunk as ever I became in the more ordinary way, and each coup only tempted him to fresher and bolder efforts. I was writing this article at his suggestion, for where I would much prefer to be as inconspicuous as possible, especially in anything relating to crime, it was his idea that to make oneself known in some other capacity was first-rate camouflage. I must confess that it was not difficult to get into the spirit of the thing. As I say, I could be quite sincere in wishing an immediate end to the burglaries though not, perhaps, for the same reason as the general public — and I was rather enjoying taking the police to task for being outwitted time and again.

I was just polishing some last phrases when I heard a step on the stairs of my Otnum Street flat — for this was in the good old days when Jeffars and I were still warmly welcome in society, and long before our safety, or Jeffars's at any rate, depended on the dubious Dr. Aldobeth.

It was Jeffars himself, as breezy and debonair as ever.

"Get your hat, Namby, for we are to spend the afternoon at the National Gallery."

I began to protest. I had in fact been contemplating a generous peg of whisky as reward for my labours of the day, but my objections fell, as usual, on deaf ears.

"Later, my dear Namby, you shall have your fill. Right now,

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a little culture will do you good," said he, laughing.

"That's all very well for you, " I was still grumbling as I settled myself into a hansom by his side, "but I care not a farthing for Art, as you well know." For Jeffars has a love and appreciation for Beauty in its visual form which is forever lost on me. Yet I was also powerless to refuse him, which is how we came to be strolling through the National Gallery on that particular Thursday. Belatedly it occurred to me that he might be contemplating the abduction of some exhibit there, which gave me a thrill of fear; there are times when his audacity, in my opinion, goes well beyond the bounds of common sense, and I think that robbing the National Gallery would be a damn fool thing to do. However, the thought that he was including me in his preliminary scouting for once did much to mollify my bad temper at being hauled to a place where I had no wish to be. Besides, I became too occupied with trying to think of ways to dissuade him to remember how disgruntled I was.

Yet as the afternoon wore on, I doubted this construction of its purpose. We covered a good many galleries of that institution, yet Jeffars had but a casual eye for the works exhibited. Nor did he appear to have a particular objective. We wandered at random, it seemed, yet somewhat more rapidly than is usually the case when inspecting works of art.

When we reentered the third or fourth of rooms we had already seen, I was about to protest afresh when Jeffars, by my side, uttered a low, satisfied cry. He led me over to where two young ladies were assiduously examining a Mortslade and raised his hat.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed enthusiastically. "What a lucky chance to see you ladies again today! Let me introduce my good friend Namby Runsden. Namby, meet the Misses Ruth Daggerand and Mona Picon. I was honoured to make their acquaintance at a dinner last evening."

The young ladies seemed quite pleasantly surprised to encounter Jeffars, but for my part, I was puzzled and irritated once more. That he had not met them by accident, but had dragged me here for the very purpose of this 'chance meeting' I had no doubt, but the reason escaped me. Jeffars is not, as a rule, one for the ladies, and while one of these was pretty and one was drab, neither seemed particularly different from the scores of young girls that grace any London season.

Almost before I knew it, Jeffars had wandered to the other end of the room with the pretty one, where they stood with their heads together talking in low murmurs, and paying scant attention to

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the paintings, while I was left to make conversation as best I might with the plain one. How like Jeffars, I thought sullenly, then dutifully turned my attention to Mona Picon.

Actually, she was not so ill-favoured as had at first appeared, but was quite pretty in her own unassuming way. I decided it must be the worn-out, ill-fitting clothes that had given me that first impression, together with a manner so uncertain and apologetic as to be almost abject. Yet she brightened a bit as I showed some interest in her, but all the while I was wondering what Jeffars was up to, and when it might please him to leave this hall of culture for some homier, more fulfilling pleasures. I thought longingly of my sideboard, with its whisky and siphon.

As if in answer to my thought, he and his pretty companion turned and strolled our way.

"Namby, what do you think?" He smiled. "We have just been invited to spend the weekend with these lovely ladies. Miss Daggerand's grandmother, Lady Woolwentham, is having a house party, which we are to join. You have nothing on, have you?"

He stooped to brush a speck from his trousers, managing to throw me a look which said as plainly as words, "Play up, you fool!" In consequence, I just managed not to put my foot in it, while the old anger swept over me at Jeffars for not taking me into his confidence, that I might the better play my part.

Back in my flat, the dear old whisky glass in my hand, I softened when he assured me that I should know all at this very moment.

"Namby, Lady Woolwentham simply drips with diamonds! So much was clear at the dinner last night. From her ears, her bosom, her fingers! You never saw so many jewels on one single, fat, disgusting person. She's a wealthy old woman, but utterly disagreeable. You know my principles, Namby, never to steal from a house in which I am a guest. Bad taste, poor manners, and all that. It simply isn't done. But this woman takes the prize for bad manners. She's greedy and a fool. Why, you should see how she treats that poor Mona Picon, who is her companion, and a poor relation, I think. She makes an absolute slave of her, forcing her to wear cast-off clothes that are worn out and don't fit, and generally humiliating her. The poor girl is only allowed out on Thursdays, to accompany Miss Daggerand in her pursuit of Art. That grim old she-devil deserves to be taught a lesson! Her greed is evident from the positively indecent number of diamonds she flaunts, and her foolishness from the way she wears them about everywhere, as I am told she does. But that's not the half of it, Namby,"

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and he gave me a significant look, "she leaves them in a jewel case on her dressing table at night, won't lock them up. Don't you think she's asking for it?"

Some of his outrage and enthusiasm began to communicate themselves to me, and I endeavored to fight down the image that rose to my mind of those two charming young clubmen, L. A. Jeffars, the well-known and extraordinarily talented cricketer, and my modest but agreeable self, being discovered at a house party cracking a crib in the hostess's boudoir.

"You are right, Namby," he added, totally misreading my thoughts, or perhaps seizing the excuse to put forth his own, "it is not very sporting. I look at it as an object lesson with which we are obligated to provide the lady."

And so it was that the next day saw us stepping out of a dashing carriage at Shetley Moat, the impressive stately home of the Dowager Duchess, Lady Woolwentham, just in time to dress for dinner.

I thought I was designated to take in Miss Picon, who, slave or not, was included in the party, probably to make an even number, when I saw her being whisked away on Jeffars's arm, while Ruth Daggerand stood by my side, a bewildered look on her pretty face. I gallantly offered my arm, and in we went.

She seemed somewhat abstracted, which was just as well, as my own thoughts were still dwelling on Jeffars's plans. For his part, he seemed as absorbed in Miss Picon as he had at the gallery in Miss Daggerand. I could see that the latter was not unaware of it, nor was she pleased.

Her grandmother was very much as Jeffars had described her. Her whole person seemed to blaze with diamonds, mostly single stones set in rings, earrings, broach, and one magnificent pendant. She had greeted us with no marked cordiality, though she had thawed somewhat toward Jeffars on being told that he was a famous cricketer who played for the Gentlemen, but for myself she showed scarce more respect than for the unfortunate Mona Picon. As I watched her at dinner, from a long way down the table, being gracious to the titled, famous and wealthy, and rude and contemptuous toward the rest, I began to look forward to Jeffars's programme with positive relish.

"I see you are admiring my grandmother's diamonds."

Miss Daggerand's voice recalled me to the present, just as I was lifting a glass of champagne to my lips. I almost spilled it.

"Er—yes—they are most impressive," I mumbled.

"Do you know, I've had the most awful time trying to get her to

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take proper care of them. Finally, just today, she had a safe put in, after I managed to convince her that her insurance firm would take a dim view of the casual way she'd been keeping them."

"Good for you," I said, and hoped my voice didn't sound as hollow as I felt. Well, at least I could breathe easier knowing we would be on the right side of the law for this weekend at any rate. The thing now was to get hold of L. A. and apprise him of this development.

This proved no easy matter. After dinner there was no sign of him, and I had to try to make myself agreeable to the company with my mind on quite other things. I fancy that I am no mean hand at the social graces, but I have yet to learn to sustain them when Jeffars and I are plotting something, let alone when the plot has gone amiss.

Lady Woolwentham began calling, shrilly and peremptorily, for her companion, who appeared after a short delay, somewhat breathless.

"Where are my drops, you stupid girl? Can't you be relied upon at all? I only let you come to these affairs out of the kindness of my heart; you had better have the goodness to be in attendance and not forget your duties!" Her face was grim as the girl scurried away, and when I glanced round after that little scene, there was my friend Jeffars, coolly looking on with an ironical smile.

Yet even after I had found him, my efforts to seek private converse were fruitless. He became the life of the party. I finally went up to bed, and was just pouring myself a generous peg from the flask I had had the forethought to bring with me when there was the softest of taps on the door.

"My poor Namby, when will you ever learn?" he asked ruefully when he had come in, clad in slippers and dressing gown, and carefully closed the door behind him. "Would you really sit around in a house full of people, servants moving to and fro, and discuss robbery where any guest or footman might hear us?"

"Yes, I see what you mean, but I wanted to tell you it's all up. The old lady has a safe after all."

"Do you think I didn't know that? Why do you think I bore Miss Picon in to dinner, when I should have taken Miss Daggerand, and out to the terrace afterward, but to check out all the details? As the old lady's companion, she might be expected to know a good deal of her arrangements, as indeed she did."

Good old Jeffars! I should have known he wouldn't neglect a pal except in the line of business. He continued with growing eagerness.

"But that only makes it more sporting. My word! Did you see

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that pendant? Our efforts would be worth it for that alone. Luckily, I have brought all my tools along. It is as well never to take a thing for granted."

He began to pace back and forth in that excited way he has when his interest is aroused in a prize he covets. I watched him uneasily, for I have often felt that one day he will go too far, and that, with all his cleverness, resourcefulness, and courage, retribution will catch up with us.

"Now," said he, stopping his pacing at last and throwing himself into an armchair, "here's the plan. Lady Woolwentham has a suite on this floor, not far from your bedroom. Mona Picon has the room next to hers on the other side. The suite consists of a sitting room, dressing room, bedroom, and bath. The safe is in the sitting room, behind a picture. People are so unoriginal, aren't they? You can hardly blame thieves nowadays for stealing when all is made so predictable. It's as though she were begging us to."

"You don't think," I ventured, "that she might continue to use the jewel case? Old people so often cling to old habits."

"Really, Namby," he scoffed, "when she's been impressed enough with the importance of the safe to have it installed?

"She should be sleeping soundly," he went on. "Those drops were a sleeping draught, and that, with the champagne, should prevent her from waking. The main danger, I think, comes from our little friend Mona Picon, whose room communicates with the dowager's sitting room. Her maid sleeps in the servants' quarters, and yours is the only other occupied room on this part of the floor. Your part will be to listen for signs that Miss Picon has been alerted, and warn me in time for us both to get away before we are seen.

"Did you bring your mask and ruffianly clothes, as I told you? Good man! Then if we are seen, there is still a chance to get away without recognition and resume our roles as innocent guests. I have my things on under my dressing gown."

Another half-hour found us, suitably disguised, even to caps pulled well over our ears, slipping softly into Lady Woolwentham's suite. She had taken the precaution of locking her door, but Jeffars's picklocks made quick work of that. It was, so he whispered to me, a disappointingly simple lock. I, for one, was not disappointed.

Once inside the sitting room, with the door shut behind us, we had little difficulty locating the safe. The room was rather stuffy and old-fashioned, and most of the pictures also had the comfortable, slightly faded appearance of having been long-term resi-

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dents. One alone wore the shiny air of a newcomer, and for this Jeffars instantly headed. Gently he laid out his tools and deftly set to work. I could not resist the temptation to peek into the lady's dressing room, despite Jeffars's earlier scoffing. I felt it would take but a moment to scan the dressing table, and then I should take up my appointed station by the opposite doorway. Sure enough, there was a small jewel case in plain view, and in my excitement—heightened, I must confess, by my desire to score off Jeffars for once—caution deserted me for a fatal split-second, and I stumbled.

I stood electrified. At first all was still, and I began to breathe naturally again, but then ominous sounds came to my ears that froze me all the more rigidly in my tracks. From the inner room issued creakings, rumblings, and snorts, all suggestive of an old lady waking up. I looked wildly around me for something that would help to save our situation. Impulsively I snatched up the old lady's dressing gown, with some notion of delaying pursuit, for I reasoned she would be loath to rouse the house without some such covering; and it also occurred to me that, at the very worst, it might be used as a sort of strait jacket, to render her helpless, and even, thrust over her head, prevent recognition.

Still carrying it, I rushed into the sitting room.

"Flee," I hissed. "She's awake."

Jeffars needed no second warning. In one motion he scooped up his tools, and I caught the merest glimpse, as we shot through the door, of the safe ajar and a fire-breathing dragon in nightdress, nightcap askew, standing in the doorway of the dressing room.

We managed to reach my room, so blessedly nearby, before she had reached her own outer door, so that she was none the wiser as to who the intruders were or where they had gone. The imperious ring for her companion was clearly audible within my bedroom, and there we stood, clothed and masked as burglars, I with the Dowager's dressing gown in my hand, Jeffars with the telltale tools in his pocket.

He tore off his mask, and his eyes were sparkling with that devil-may-care look I knew so well.

"Here's where we show what we're made of, Namby, old thing," he laughed. "Sympathetic guests, eager to lay the miscreants by the heels, aghast at the outrage perpetrated on our hostess.

"Quick, off with your things, and into your pyjamas and dressing gown. That's it. Let's just tousle your hair a bit." He stood back to survey me, head cocked on one side.

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"Excellent! The very picture of a guest roused from sleep by running footsteps and bells pealing—*in that order,* understand? Really, your bedroom is most providentially placed for this little charade. Tell them you caught a glimpse of a man or two running down the stairs. Give the impression they went out by the window on the landing. Organize a search. I will make one or two little arrangements, and join you later."

It was not difficult to carry out Jeffars's latest resourceful scheme. Lady Woolwentham and Mona Picon were standing bewilderedly in the passage, and even as I emerged Lady Woolwentham's maid came running up, accompanied by Ruth Daggerand. The maid and the girls looked confused and uncertain; the Dowager looked as if she were about to have an apoplectic fit.

Excitedly I told them of hearing pounding footsteps which had awakened me, and of just catching sight of someone disappearing down the stairs. I was able to convey that it could have been one, two, or three men, that I couldn't be sure. I added that I had just stepped back inside to fetch my dressing gown, an improvisation of my own to account for the slight delay in my appearance. Jeffars wasn't the only one who could think quickly in a tight place!

I advised the ladies to summon footmen and gentlemen guests to give chase, and to notify the police, before dashing off myself in an ostensible endeavor to apprehend the criminal or criminals, not without some anxious moments. What if the window gave on a sheer drop, or worse, was unmoveably stuck or locked?

To my relief I found it already open, and shouted back, "I have found their way of escape! This window!" I lost no time in climbing through it, and found myself on top of a small portico which offered several means of reaching the ground—pillars on one side, ivy on another, a convenient tree branch on still a third. I gazed about me, but, not surprisingly, saw nothing at all. Then I hurried back to report my findings, and sent the eager houseguests, now thronging the passage, and several footmen as well, out to search the grounds in all directions.

Jeffars was in the thick of things, exuding sympathy for the robbery victim. I was just in time to hear him saying solicitously, "She looks positively ill, don't you think? Come into my friend's room; he has a flask of whisky, a glass of it will do her good."

Once again my heart seemed to stop beating. Had he forgotten the raggedy clothes that would give us away, to say nothing of Lady Woolwentham's dressing gown? I followed them in at a signal from Jeffars, my heart in my feet.

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I should have known better. The room was as natural as could be. There was my rumpled bed, my dinner clothes casually hung over a chair, nothing in view that would be amiss in the bedroom of any houseguest.

It was here the police found us, as Jeffars was in the act of pouring out a glass of whisky for the Dowager. She did indeed look ill, on top of an obvious fury, and took the whisky at one gulp.

Ponicrest, the local police inspector, glanced only casually round the room. I had another uneasy moment when I saw that the wardrobe door was open, but a hasty peek reassured me that all there was to be seen was only what was to be expected—a spare suit of dinner clothes, country tweeds, and a travelling suit.

The police continued the search which the amateurs had begun, but had at last to admit failure.

"We'll do our best, Milady," Ponicrest said gloomily in the drawing room, "but I'm afraid there isn't much to go on. You say the safe is empty and your jewels are gone. I'd be more sanguine if you'd waited for us as you ought to have done," he added with faint reproach, which I suspect would have been far more direct and acerbic had he not been speaking to a Dowager Duchess, and a formidable one at that. "Any trail there might have been is so mucked about now, with your footmen and guests running all over the place, that it will be a difficult scent to pick up, if not impossible. Still," he sighed, "we'll try," and he took his leave.

"And now, Namby," said Jeffars, as one by one household and guests trailed off to their beds, "let us have some of your excellent whisky in your room before we too retire."

"Do you know," he exclaimed when we were safely away from other ears, "that temperamental old termagant refused her drops tonight, after all the fuss she made about them? No wonder she woke up!

"A clever touch, that open window, didn't you think?" he added carelessly.

Of course! I perceived then what I had been too dense or agitated to think of before. Jeffars, with his usual foresighted attention to the smallest detail, had opened the window before coming to my room, for just such an eventuality—to provide a plausible means of egress for the supposed burglars. As I continued to think it out, I grasped further subtleties to his plan — the search, organized by myself at his instruction, which would account for the inability of the police to find traces of the thieves. My admiration for my friend was never greater than at that moment.

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"I did think you were taking an unnecessary risk to bring them in here," I said with some asperity. "There was much to give us away."

"My good Namby!" he said laughing. "I am only glad no one but myself was looking at you at that moment. That very thought was written all over your face. Don't you have more faith in me than that? I brought them in on purpose, to make it clear that we had nothing to hide, if anyone indeed thinks anything about it afterward. You may be sure I took good care to conceal the revealing garments, including Milady's dressing gown, under your own clothes before I joined the party.

"Now for our reward for the night's proceedings. And I must congratulate you on a greater talent for intelligence and concealment than ever I suspected. "Where are the jewels?"

I looked at him blankly.

"I haven't got them. You took them."

"But that is just what I didn't do, old chap. I got the safe open all right; really, they insult my intelligence with those flimsy locks. A child could have done it. But *it was empty!*

"I thought you were right after all, that the old lady was stubborn enough to keep on using her jewel case, and that you had got it from the dressing room."

Sadly I hung my head. Apparently I had had my chance for glory, and muffed it. "I never reached it," said I. "I was barely over the threshold when I heard her, and I fled. Besides, you had so ridiculed the idea that I didn't think it was worth the risk to take the additional time and steps to snatch it."

"Oh, well," Jeffars said philosophically, though I could see he was keenly disappointed, "we must take the bad with the good. At least we are still solid citizens in the eyes of society, and can try again.

"But—" a frown creased his forehead, "if we haven't the booty, neither does the old she-dragon. I'll swear that was no act; she was simply wild at her loss. I wonder . . ." he added softly, and was lost in thought for a few minutes. Then he shrugged.

"Still," he said, "one small problem remains to us, and that is how to dispose of that infernal dressing gown you brought away with you." He reached into the wardrobe, fumbled under some of my clothes, and flung the bright pink satin garment on the bed.

To both our ears there came a tiny but unmistakeable sound of little clicks.

We gaped at each other, then Jeffars burst into laughter. "Namby, you did it after all! This time I am in your debt, without

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a doubt. That dear old thing, stubborn as a mule, wouldn't use her new safe that had been forced upon her, nor could she go on using the jewel box she had been warned against, so what *did* she do, like some little bourgeoise housewife bent on devising her own hiding place? She put 'em in the pocket of her dressing gown. No wonder she looked so sick!"

And he continued to shake with laughter as he thrust his hand into a pink satin pocket and brought it out glittering with diamonds, including the fabulous pendant.

For my part, I have never known such pleasure. For though our ventures fill me with dread, and there are times when I yearn to be the law-abiding citizen the world thinks me, I must own to larceny in my soul no less than Jeffars; for otherwise would I continue our peculiar partnership? I too feel the thrill of a successful coup.

But that was as nothing to the pleasure of it being *I,* Namby Runsden, who was the instrument of triumph that night. No matter that it was inadvertent. But for me, there would have been no diamonds to keep us in comfort the rest of that season. L.A. himself was well away on the wrong tack in going for the safe. He may continue to act superior at times, but since that night, there is a new edge of respect in his tone.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I don't suppose there can be a reader who failed to recognize the gentleman cracksman A. J. Raffles in L. A. Jeffars or his faithful Bunny in Namby. (Full anagram: Bunny Manders — Namby Runsden.) I'm sure too that many Raffles devotees remember Dr. Theobald, who was used as a shield when Raffles was hiding from the police disguised as an invalid. He is referred to in this story as Dr. Aldobeth. Mount Street, the location of Bunny's flat, is here anagrammed to Otnum Street.

Other anagrams, for which you need not be familiar with Raffles lore:
Lady Woolwentham—wealthy old woman
Ruth Daggerand—granddaughter
Mona Picon—companion
Mortslade (the artist they studied in the National Gallery)—Old Master
Shetley Moat—Stately home
Ponicrest—Inspector

Oh yes, it follows once again that the author, W. H. Guernon, must of course be the creator of one of literature's most beloved lawbreakers, or an anagram of E. W. Hornung.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Sadly, the real author of "The Object Lesson," Norma Schier, died in 1995, before we could publish this story.

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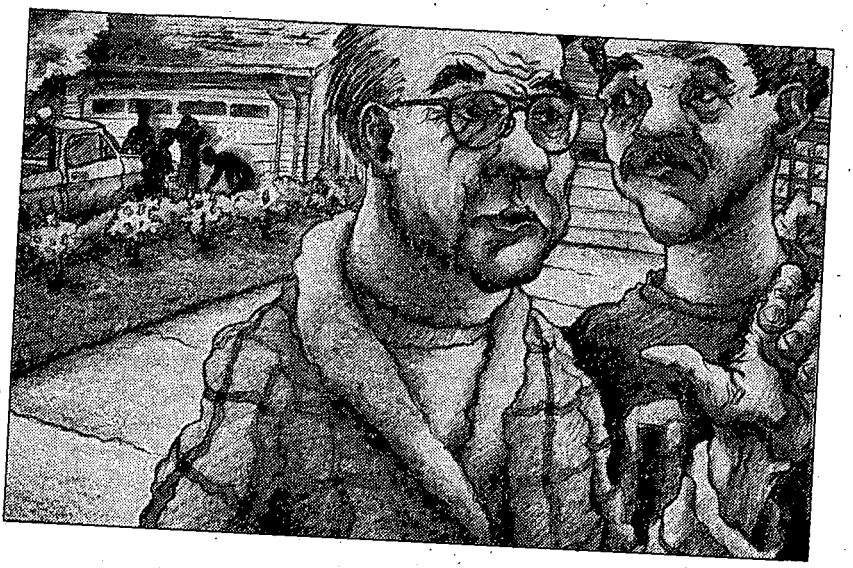

Art by Theodore Isgler

In a Quiet Neighborhood

by Barbara Owens

Wearing my bathrobe. Standing on the sidewalk in the first pale light. Early birds talking, the sweetness of roses filling my head, cool morning air against my skin. Familiar neighbors rousing, appearing to fetch their newspapers, then naturally gravitating towards the activity going on at the house next door. Official vehicles lined up at the curb and a growing number of professionals doing what had to be done. Eerie. Unnatural, unreal.

My house and Anderson's shared the same floor plan in reverse. Our garages and driveways stood side by side, separated by a common strip of greenery. My side presented blooming roses. The Andersons had started a new hedge on theirs, no more than two

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feet high. What lay partly under the pickup's nose in the other driveway could easily be seen from mine. From the street it was hidden from view.

I was standing alone at the foot of my drive when Rich Nichols materialized at my shoulder. Rich was a younger man, the first to welcome us to the neighborhood when we moved in. He had become a fine neighbor and friend.

"John?" His voice was hushed. "What's going on?"

"It's Dolph." My own voice sounded rusted and weak. "I found him when I came out to get the paper." I took a gulp of air; my lungs seemed empty and useless. "Somebody killed him, Rich."

"What?" He gripped my arm. "Are you okay? You and Peg want to come over, get some coffee into you?"

"I can't. I have to—they told me to stay here."

He turned away reluctantly. "Okay. But let me know if I can do anything. Anything, understand?"

Watching the police deal with Dolph Anderson's death scene, I recognized several faces. Those men had been to Dolph's home, and mine, before. The sick feeling inside me swelled.

Peg came up beside me, slipping her hand into mine and squeezing hard. I knew what she was thinking, what most of our neighbors were thinking. Dolph Anderson had finally gotten himself killed, and the police were going to suspect me.

We had lived in our comfortable tract house for a little less than two years. Sometimes it seemed much longer. Childless, Peg and I were looking forward to our twilight years. I had just retired from the postal service and finally had time to devote to my passion, roses. Peg wanted to take all the classes in gourmet cooking, pottery, and other interests she couldn't make room for during her years of teaching. We had wanted a quiet neighborhood and had scouted areas until we thought we found one that was ideal. Well-

When a mystery takes place in an environment in which violence is an anomaly, we call it a "cozy." As you'd expect from her title, California author Barbara Owens has written a classic cozy short story this time, complete with the sorts of clues and psychological insights a Miss Marple would savor.

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kept homes, neat lawns, and wide, shady streets. It looked friendly and safe. Proud of our find, we moved in.

My first meeting with Dolph Anderson is still as clear as a photograph in my mind. I had been to the nursery early one morning for fertilizer and all the fixings—roses were already on my mind. Dolph was standing in his driveway when I pulled into mine. He was a man of medium stature, thick in the chest, a frizz of graying hair crowding his collar. He grinned but said nothing when I stepped from my car, so I introduced myself. Dolph rocked on his heels and grinned wider.

"Post office, huh?" he said. "Pretty soft job. I run a trucking company myself. Not a big one but I do all right."

I remember his probing look as somewhat odd, almost as though he was challenging me to something. Then he stuck out his hand and we shook. He had a punishing grip.

"So, welcome to the neighborhood," he said, and winked. "Glad to have you here."

"I've got a hunch he thinks I'm a wimp," I reported to Peg. "But he seems friendly enough. That's nice, isn't it?"

His body had not yet been removed when two officers took Peg and me inside to give a statement. One of them, a man named Rollins, was a stranger to me. The other, a young man with sandy hair, had been to my home on several occasions. His name was Perdue. I smiled at him and he smiled back, but his eyes stayed cool and guarded. He knew the history.

I decided to take the offensive. "I can save you some time, gentlemen, by telling you up front that I didn't kill Dolph Anderson." My voice wasn't as strong as I would have liked; I cleared my throat. "He was a bully and a miserable human being. I don't think the man had a single redeeming virtue, but I didn't kill him."

"This isn't an interrogation, Mr. Harkness," Rollins said calmly. "You happened to find the body. We'd appreciate anything you can tell us about what happened out there."

There wasn't much to tell, I said. Peg and I had heard nothing, seen nothing. I had gone out at my usual time to bring in the morning paper and saw Dolph's arms sticking out from under the nose of his truck. It was plain to see that he was dead. I had come directly back inside and phoned the police.

"I don't own a gun, I'm sure you'll find all our knives accounted for, and if he was killed by any other means I didn't do that

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either," I concluded. "There have been times, I'll admit, when it seemed he almost deserved to die, but that's not my decision to make."

"Ask anyone in the neighborhood," Peg spoke up sharply. "They'll tell you what kind of man he was." Her look accused young Perdue. "You should know. You've been here often enough."

Perdue was writing in a notebook and didn't respond. "Please understand that no one is accusing you of anything," Rollins repeated patiently. "It's our job to ask these questions. There is a record of bad blood between you and the Andersons."

"If there was bad blood, it was all on his side," I defended myself stoutly. "I tried to be a good neighbor. Ask anyone. I really did try."

It started small. When Dolph or one of his boys asked to borrow something, I willingly lent it. That's what neighbors are for. I did wonder why a man who ran a trucking company needed to borrow tools, but I lent them anyway. And each time I did, they came back damaged, if they were returned at all. Bent, nicked, gouged, chipped—I finally had to conclude it was being done deliberately. I kept my tools in prime condition and Dolph was using my pride to goad me.

Initially, I kept quiet, but as time went on and we met more of our neighbors, warnings began to flow.

"Don't lend him anything," George Shumacher told me. "Believe me, we've all been there. Nobody knows why he does it. Maybe it's how he gets his kicks."

"And don't leave anything lying around outside," Mitch Bowman added. "If Dolph doesn't steal it, his kids will. Nail it down or put ID on it, John."

"My best advice is to avoid the whole damn family," Rich Nichols agreed grimly. "Try to be friendly and you'll pay for it."

"Has anyone ever talked to him?" I asked. "Or contacted the police?"

"He's too smart to get caught," Rich said. "The people who lived there before you tried, believe me. There's never enough proof. That's why they finally moved."

Peg and I were dismayed. Our nice quiet neighborhood. But I stopped lending my tools. And when I did, the older boy, Donnie, started parking his truck in the street across my driveway. At least once or twice a week he did this, and each time I had to go to their door and ask to have it moved. At nineteen, Donnie was the

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image of his father, same heavy chest and smirky grin. Each time I confronted him he would stroll out to the curb without apology, move the truck, shrug at my request not to do it again, and a few days later we would repeat our ritual.

On a day when Peg had the flu and I drove her to the doctor in the rain, we came home to find the truck blocking our driveway. I saw red. I pounded on the door and informed that smug grin that I'd call the police the next time I found it there. Over Donnie's shoulder, Dolph winked at me.

"Now, John," he said softly. "I don't think you want to do that."

But in a few days I did do it, and that's when the real harassment began.

"You know all this," I told Perdue. "You were here."

The young officer's face softened slightly. "Yes, sir," he said.

"Dolph called me that night and said I'd made a big mistake," I related to Rollins. "He always talked quietly, never raised his voice. Then things began to happen. We never knew when to expect them. Weeks would go by, then suddenly there'd be garbage strewn all over our backyard, or obscenities spray-painted on my garage door, scratches on my car, motor oil spread over my driveway. Once when Peg and I came home from a weekend trip, every window on the back side of the house was broken. And I'd call you people and nothing would happen." I stopped myself; my voice was turning shrill. "He just kept it up and no one stopped him," I finished weakly.

"He always denied it," young Perdue said. "There was nothing we could prove."

"We tried to catch him at it," Peg said. "For a while we took turns sitting up nights. But he was too smart for us. I don't know how he knew we were watching, but he did."

Her eyes filled with tears. I knew what was coming.

"John got a puppy for me," she went on. "A good little soul, never barked or bothered anything. We left him in the backyard for a few minutes one afternoon while we ran an errand and when we got back the little guy was already dying. Someone had thrown hamburger with ground glass in it over the fence. The pup hadn't eaten much, but it didn't take much for a baby his size." She glared at the two men. "He suffered plenty before the vet put him to sleep. Now we knew who did it and so did you, but he got away with it again. So we just stopped calling you. What was the use?" She reached for my hand. "My husband is a gentle man but,

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believe me, if he was going to kill Dolph Anderson he would have done it that day."

No one said anything for a minute. Then Perdue put away his notebook and the men rose.

"Thank you," Rollins said. "I think we've got enough for now."

Peg was still wiping her eyes, so I showed them to the door.

Some neighbors came by that evening, their mood somber and subdued.

"You all know they think I did it," I said.

"That's why we're here," Rich Nichols said. "We all talked to them today, and all of us said the same thing. That John Harkness was a decent man who'd taken a lot from Dolph but was simply not capable of murder."

I told them how much their support meant to me.

"I said they should look closer to home," Beth Shumacher declared. "At Alma or the boys. He bullied the family, too, not just his neighbors."

"All but Donnie," her husband said. "Donnie's just like him."

"Well, Alma and Brad took a lot," his wife insisted. "Maybe one of them decided not to take it anymore."

"I tried to make friends with Alma when we first moved in," Peg said. "But I guess she wasn't interested."

"Peg, we all tried," Rita Nichols assured her. "It wasn't because she didn't want to. She told me once that Dolph didn't want her out with the neighbors, he wanted her at home."

"Do you think he beat her?" Peg asked.

"I never saw any signs of it," Beth said. "It was all talk, I think. He was always making fun of her, putting her down. Took all the heart out of her. But I do think he beat Brad."

That sickened me. "Are you sure?"

"I can see, John. Brad used to be buddies with our Tim when they were little. Always had a bad bump or scrape somewhere, not just the usual boy scuffs. Once when they were swimming in our pool, I looked out and saw his ribs were one big bruise. I asked Tim about it later. He said Brad told him his dad hit and kicked him a lot. Said he hated Dolph and was going to kill him when he got big."

"You never told me that," George said. "Do the police know?"

"They do now. I'm ashamed that I never reported it before. I thought it was just kid talk, didn't want to cause trouble. But if the police are going after John for Dolph's murder, I wanted them to know."

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There was a short, heavy silence. Then Beth raised her chin defiantly. "I think Brad did it. And I hope he gets away with it. As far as I'm concerned, Dolph Anderson got what he deserved."

One of the things they had learned was that Dolph had been killed with some unusual kind of sharp instrument, cut in the stomach and throat. The wounds had been so deep and vicious that he had bled to death in a very short time.

I was working with my roses along the driveway on the following morning when young Perdue pulled up in an unmarked car. The day was warm, but at the sight of him a quick chill skittered across the back of my neck.

He flashed a tight smile. "Morning. Got some pretty flowers there."

I cupped a full-blown Chicago Peace for him to admire. "I call them my passion."

"Afraid I don't know a rose from a petunia," he said. "My wife grows roses, though."

I touched the petals gently. "Did you ever see anything more beautiful? Food for the soul."

He poked the dirt around them with his toe. "What's that you're doing?"

"Loosening the soil around their roots, helping them breathe. Soil here has a tendency to compact and roses suffer if it gets too hard."

He glanced across at the Anderson house. All quiet, drapes drawn. Most of the blood had been hosed from under the pickup's nose. Perdue straightened and sighed.

"The coroner thinks Mr. Anderson was killed with some kind of tool, maybe pruning shears. Like to see yours if I could, Mr. Harkness. I'm sure you've got some."

"I've got some," I answered through a closing throat. "I presume this means you still think I did it. Believe me, I—"

He held up a hand to quiet me. "We're asking all the neighbors, Mr. Harkness. You're not the only one who's had trouble with the Andersons. I can get a search warrant if I have to, but I'm hoping you'll cooperate."

The sweat on my back turned icy. "Of course I will. They're in the garage."

I was grateful that Peg was in class and didn't witness it. I showed him my tools, each hanging from a pegboard, each bearing a studded metal band with my name.

Perdue studied them. "You take good care of your stuff."

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Remembering how Dolph had ruined some of my finest, I nodded and said nothing.

Perdue passed over the small garden shears, but he honed in quickly on the long-nosed hedge shears, gleaming rust-free. He ran a cautious finger along their cutting edges.

"They have to be kept sharp," I told him, heart skidding. "Dull edges bruise the plant tissue."

"You just clean these?" he asked. "They look new."

"They are, almost. I've had them less than a year." Now my heart was pounding in my ears. "Dolph borrowed my old ones and never returned them. Said he lost them. I had to replace them."

He lifted them carefully from their hook. "Need to take these with me, okay? I'll give you a receipt. Couple of tests and you can have them back." This time his smile was almost friendly. "I promise you we won't lose them."

"Could I ask what you're looking for?"

The smile died. "For whatever we can find, Mr. Harkness."

And he left me standing beside my roses, shivering in the sun.

Beth Shumacher called that afternoon. Her hairdresser's nephew worked for Dolph's trucking company. On the afternoon before Dolph died, Brad had come into the office. He needed money for something and Dolph wouldn't give it. Their argument escalated until Brad, usually docile and retiring, began to scream at his father.

"Mimi's nephew said he just went wild," Beth reported. "Told his dad he hated him, had always hated him, and—" She paused for dramatic effect. "He said he was going to kill him, John. Everyone in the office heard it. Said he was going to kill him. The police talked to everyone down there and they've taken Brad in for questioning."

I couldn't say a word.

"I'm glad for you, John," Beth went on, "but poor, poor Brad."

"Well, he's only sixteen," I said finally. "Maybe they'll go easy on him."

"I hope you're right," she said.

When I told Peg, she began to cry.

"Then it's over. Thank God. John, I didn't want you to know, but I was so scared."

"So was I," I said, hugging her. "So was I."

I was out front again on the following morning, selecting scarlet Mr. Lincoln roses for the dining room table, when Donnie and

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Brad came out of their house and got into Dolph's truck. Donnie glared at me with hatred, but it was Brad I focused on. Taller than his older brother, slimmer, he looked back at me with nothing in his face. A skinny boy of sixteen who seemed empty, finished before he had begun. I wanted to say something but nothing came. Finally, I had to look away. Donnie backed out of the driveway and the truck pulled away. My legs felt weak; there was a whisper in my ears, and it took a few seconds to realize the whisper was real. I glanced up to see Alma Anderson standing half hidden behind one of the twin junipers framing her garage door. She was staring at the ground, but when I strained my ears I could hear that she was whispering, "I'm sorry, John, so sorry. Somewhere—somehow I lost control."

"I know, Alma, I understand," I whispered back. After a moment, she backed silently away.

Our usually peopled neighborhood looked deserted. Everyone was on the phone, sharing news. We were told that Brad was still being questioned. He would not admit to killing his father but he wouldn't deny it either. Just repeated over and over that he hated his father and was glad that he was dead.

Donnie had tried to provide him with an alibi, swearing that Brad had been with him and some friends all evening, but the friends would not corroborate this and no one remembered seeing Brad with the boys.

Brad himself would not provide the police with an accounting of his evening. His mother said he was watching television in the family room when she went to bed around midnight. Dolph had not returned home from his weekly poker game.

Three neighbors had seen Brad in the early evening before the murder, trimming the hedge along the driveway with hedge shears, my old pair that Dolph had never returned. Brad would neither confirm nor deny this, and those shears were now missing. The police had searched for them and not found them.

Rita and Rich Nichols invited us over for dinner. The Shumachers were also there.

"I wonder if Brad might have turned out better if someone had taken an interest in him," Rich said. "It's a rotten shame things turned out this way. His life's ruined now, that's for sure."

"Yeah," George Shumacher agreed. "Even if he's convicted as a juvenile offender, he'll be different when he comes back."

"I can't imagine what it would take to make me kill someone," Peg said. "No matter how hard life is, no matter how badly some-

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one treats you, to kill another human being—I just don't know how I could do it."

"I might do it in self-defense," Beth Shumacher said. "Or to protect a loved one. You're right, though, I can't see myself doing it."

"Let's get off this subject," Rich suggested with a grimace. "How about a toast to John because he's off the hook now? It's over. Life goes on."

Someone called the next morning to say that Brad's arrest looked imminent. I went out to my yard, breathing the air of a free man. Peg wanted to take a vacation, a short trip somewhere to clear out the ugly memories. We were considering the mountains, and I was visualizing a cold stream full of greedy trout when a car pulled into my drive. Officer Perdue climbed out with my pruning shears under his arm.

"Thought you'd like these back as soon as possible," he said. "They tested clean."

I gave him a big smile. "I'm relieved to hear that."

He bent over my Chicago Peace, leaning low to study it.

"Would you like to take some home for your wife?" I asked him. "I'll be glad to cut a few."

"Thanks anyway," he said. "As a matter of fact, I drove her by here yesterday to see them."

"Well, I hope she enjoyed them."

He straightened slowly. "Actually, I wanted her to take a look at something that's been bothering me. I see you've done some sprucing up, but I noticed when we found Mr. Anderson's body that a couple of your bushes looked raggedy. Almost like somebody had been hacking at them. I wanted to see what she thought about it and she said no rose expert would prune that badly or heavily, especially this time of year."

Silence settled between us while I tried to think of something to say. "Really?" was all I could come up with.

"See, it started me wondering if maybe Dolph Anderson finally figured out what would hurt you the most. Even more than that puppy. Your roses, Mr. Harkness, your so-called passion. Now what if he decided to do them in during the middle of some night and he got caught at it?"

"Got caught," I repeated.

"Yeah. See, Mr. Harkness, the coroner found bits of vegetable matter in some of Mr. Anderson's wounds. In real deep. Turned out to be traces of rose leaves."

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"Rose leaves."

"Right. The Andersons don't have any roses, do they?"

I took a very long breath. "No, I don't believe they do." Suddenly young Perdue seemed much larger than I remembered him.

"Have a favor to ask you, Mr. Harkness. Those old pruning shears Mr. Anderson borrowed from you are missing. We looked everywhere and not a trace." He paused. "Even checked the crawl space under his house."

The fine day was dimming. I couldn't think fast enough. "I'd sure like to find them," Perdue went on. "I wonder if you'd mind us looking in your crawl space, Mr. Harkness."

"Brad could have put them there," I whispered. "To frame me."

"That's true, I guess he could have. Even so, they shouldn't have your fingerprints on them, should they? The Andersons have been using them for a year. Your old prints should be covered up. If we find them with no fresh prints of yours, you don't have a thing to worry about, do you?"

I hadn't even noticed the second car pull up to the curb, two men inside, waiting.

Perdue touched his breast pocket. "I have the warrant here if I need it."

I reached out to touch the soft petals of a perfect rose. They felt cool and clean.

"No," I said. "That won't be necessary. Go ahead. Look."

I don't know why I thought I'd get away with it. I'm not a natural criminal, that's what it was. I didn't start thinking until it was over, when it was too late.

Something woke me in the night, probably Dolph coming home. I looked out the front window, saw him leaning over his little hedge, and didn't understand for a minute. Then I saw the shears. He was going after my roses with my own shears.

If he hadn't been on his knees I never could have overpowered him, but once he was off balance and I got my hands on the shears, I had enough sense to go for the softest and most vulnerable parts. Dolph never made a sound.

I remember dragging him under the nose of his truck before he bled all over my roses, and I remember tossing the shears into my crawl space. I know I cleaned up my damaged roses and bagged the leavings in the trash. It was very quiet and I remember being afraid that I would be seen or heard.

I don't remember washing the blood off me or going back to bed,

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where Peg was still sound asleep. But I do remember I finally stopped shaking and started planning how I would rise at my usual time and "discover" the body when I went out to bring in the paper.

And it almost worked. Probably would have worked if young Perdue's wife hadn't known roses. We talked with our friends about what it would take to bring us to commit a murder. Someone said protecting a loved one. Perdue's wife might understand. I was only protecting my roses.

I'll always be ashamed that I was willing to let an innocent boy take the blame for what I did. I consider myself to be a good man. What happened to me? Dolph Anderson was a despicable human being, true, but murder is murder, there's no escaping it.

Poor Peg. I don't know how she'll manage. What a tragedy. She doesn't care a thing about gardening. What will happen to my roses now? ●

The Case of the Missing Waitress

by Kathy Lovell

You sit at your table with menu in hand.
You look at the prime rib and chicken devan.
You finally decide on the amandine trout
And turn for your waitress . . . she's nowhere about.

Although you know trout goes best with white wine,
You still read the wine list, just to kill time.
You're thirsty, you're hungry, you raise to full height
And peer for your waitress . . . she's nowhere in sight.

Maybe she's kidnapped by the Maitre d',
Or maybe the chef turned her to fricassee.
Or maybe collusion involves the whole bunch.
Chances are, she herself's out to lunch.

Heaven forbid you should even think
About trying to order or getting a drink.
You can solve this case easily without much skill:
Just appear that you're ready to receive the bill.

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Art by Darryl Elliott

REMEMBRANCE

by Carolyn G. Hart

Dislike was instantaneous. And mutual.

Natalie Wherry Pearson's high-bridged nose and chiseled lips were elegant and haughty, her face as serenely arrogant as those pictured in the family portraits that lined her study. Directly behind her desk was a portrait of Colonel Amos Wherry, who died on Omaha Beach. Natalie's father.

I had now lived in Derry Hills long enough to become familiar with the local icons. Amos Wherry was a brave man, by all accounts. The glass-encased medals beneath the portrait attested to that. But it didn't mean Amos Wherry was a likable man, not if the artist's brush was true. I saw the supercilious curl to Wherry's mouth, the posture of command born not of rank but of lineage.

I was underwhelmed. I've never excelled in deference, and obeisance to wealth and position ignites in me a contrariness that borders on the pugnacious.

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This visceral response isn't unique to me, of course. All reporters have a stripe of irreverence in their mental makeup. It usually keeps them from turning into toadies, a danger for those who associate, even in an adversarial way, with the rich and powerful.

Natalie Pearson knew I was disdainful. That accounted for the tightening of those thin coral lips, the firming of her chin. She glanced down at my card, lying face up on her black-lacquered antique Chinese desk with its lovely inlays of copper. On the card, beneath my name, Henrietta O'Dwyer Collins, I had written, "I wish to speak with you concerning Judith Montgomery."

A winner of three of the genre's major awards (the Agatha, the Anthony, and the Macavity), Carolyn Hart says that her Henrie O series aims to provide "an exuberant view of age." Fans will know that "Henry O" is short for Henrietta O'Dwyer Collins, the heroine of the following story. Ms. Hart's twenty-sixth novel, *Death in Lover's Lane* (Avon, 2/97), also features the journalist-sleuth. ¶

She picked up the card. "I'm rather rushed this morning, Mrs. Collins. Since Miss Montgomery is no longer in my employ, I don't believe there is any point in our conversing." Her sharply planed face was all bones and unguent-smoothed skin. Her silvered hair fit her head in sleek waves designed by a stylist at an expensive salon. Glacial gray eyes surveyed me.

I smiled, even though I knew my eyes were as icy as hers. "But you've agreed to see me, Mrs. Pearson. That's quite interesting, you know."

Sudden red patches of anger flamed in her gaunt cheeks.

First score to me.

But now was the time to be wily. It wouldn't help Judith's cause for me to be summarily dismissed.

Before she could speak, I continued briskly. "I'm sure, of course, that your willingness to see me reflects your status as a community leader, your family tradition of noblesse oblige."

I kept my expression bland, a look perfected through years of interviewing.

As I had expected, after a flicker of surprise, she fished as nicely as a striped bass on a lazy summer afternoon.

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Those thin red lips curved into a tight bow of satisfaction. "Yes. Yes, of course. Although I don't quite see that much can be done for poor Judith." Her voice was as cool as shaved ice.

"If you could just give me the circumstances . . ."

Old fish can be cautious. She was close to taking the lure, but not quite. "What is your interest in this unfortunate matter, Mrs. Collins?"

"Judith Montgomery is one of my students." And, I didn't add, a rather prickly one, charming one moment, confrontational the next. But, nonetheless, a student who had caught my attention and who now had asked for my help.

It still seems odd to think of myself as a teacher. I spent almost a half century as a reporter, and, after my retirement, found myself in a new career at a small liberal arts college in Missouri as a member of the journalism faculty made up, with glorious élan, of old professionals. This semester I was teaching basic reporting. I still see myself as a writer who teaches, not a teacher who writes.

The fact that the *Clarion,* the Derry Hills daily newspaper, was a product of the journalism school kept me firmly rooted in news reality. It bridged town and gown in a way unusual for a college community.

"At the college." Her tone warmed a degree.

I could see a cloak of respectability settling around me.

Useful things, occupations. But deceptive, too. Doctor. Lawyer. Indian chief. Reporter. Professor. The mind responds with a stylized image. That's why con artists dress so well, smile so often.

"I am a trustee, you know." A be-ringed hand reached up to smooth an almost invisible strand that had dared to straggle loose from her spray-stiff coiffure.

"Of course."

Actually, I'd learned it only that morning after skimming through the *Clarion* file on Natalie Pearson. Then I'd dropped by the desk of Vicky Marsh, who writes the kind of personal column found only in small-town newspapers.

I wasn't especially interested in what had appeared in Vicky's column. I wanted the information that never surfaced, the behind-the-hand whispers that rustle across a small town like discarded newspapers on a windy day.

I got a lot.

Natalie Pearson would be shocked at what I knew.

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But that could come later. Right now I wanted entrée.

"I understand you hired Judith to serve as your social secretary on a part-time basis."

"Yes. It is my custom to employ a student in that role. This is the first time I've ever had a bad experience. I do appreciate the college being concerned about this matter."

I could have corrected her, made it clear I did not represent the college.

I could have, but I didn't. I had in no way suggested that I represented the school. It wasn't my job to correct her misperceptions.

"It is always a matter for concern when a student is suspected of theft. You understand that she will be suspended if charges are filed?"

Once again high red flagged her sharp cheeks.

"I am sorry to say," the words came quick and sharp, "that the police have declined to file charges. They say there is insufficient evidence." That high-bridged nose wrinkled in disdain. "However," her tone was grudging, "they've assured me they have ways of finding out when stolen goods change hands. Chief Holzer feels confident the thief will ultimately be caught."

I wished I had heard the exchange between Mrs. Pearson and Derry Hills Police Chief Everett Holzer.

Holzer and I are not simpatico. In his view, it's a (white) man's world. Everyone else (women, blacks, gays, the elderly, et al) simply get in the way and cause no end of trouble because of their uppity ways. Holzer believes the fifties marked the height of civilization.

So yes, Holzer is a chauvinist pig.

But he's smart and he's honest.

If Mrs. Pearson accurately recalled his words, if Holzer spoke of "the thief," it indicated the police were not convinced of Judith Montgomery's guilt.

"Perhaps we can help the chief."

Her eyes widened in surprise. "How would that be possible?"

"We can work together to find out the truth."

"But what can we do?"

"Talk to people. Someone else in the house may have noticed something."

"It's Judith," she said harshly.

"Then I know you'll be glad when that is proven."

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"I want it over. Over." There was a flash of sheer unhappiness in her cool gray eyes.

Why should she be distressed? Judith Montgomery was the one in trouble.

"Tell me what happened."

She took a deep breath. Her voice was clipped. "It was the night of the Hospital Ball, October fifteenth."

One week ago.

"We have it here, of course. The board counts on it." She gestured toward French windows to her left. "We have so much room. The terraces are quite perfect. And the weather is usually pleasant in October. We have a seated dinner. Three hundred this year, I believe. And an orchestra. And dancing. And, of course, I wore the diamond and ruby necklace. I always wear it at this kind of event. Everyone expects it." She said it perfunctorily, without pleasure. As if it were a burden.

"So everyone who attended the ball could have seen the necklace, known it was here in the house."

"Oh yes. But the ball ended. As balls always do." There was the faintest undertone of sadness and regret. Her thin mouth drooped.

Did she wish for life to be filled with light and music, beautiful clothes and handsome people? Was it only then that her dreams were met?

She put the letter opener on a tray, also black and lacquered. She laced together her thin, heavily ringed fingers. Sunlight glanced off those diamonds. "I was very tired. So tired. And there was the usual commotion, the caterers striking the tables, the staff cleaning. But finally, the house was quiet. So you see, it doesn't matter that everyone saw it at the ball. The ball was over." Again, that breath of regret. "I'd asked Judith to stay the night. There are always so many little things a secretary can see to. I was in my room and I just felt too weary to come down and put the necklace away. I rang for Judith. She knew the combination, of course. She took the necklace—and that's the last time anyone has seen it." She said it matter-of-factly, as if it didn't matter a whit to her.

Perhaps it only mattered to Judith.

Judith, of course, had told me what happened next: She'd come downstairs, placed the necklace in the safe, and gone straight up to the room assigned to her. ". . . a tiny hot little hole up on the third floor."

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Natalie Pearson's eyes dared me to disagree.

"When did you discover the necklace to be missing?"

"The next morning. The door to the safe was ajar." She pushed back her chair, walked to the fireplace. Her silk dress, a striking pattern of cream and black, glistened in the sunlight spilling through the terrace windows.

I joined her at the fireplace.

She tugged and a square of paneling swung open, revealing the dull gray metal of the safe.

Instead of a dial, an electronic pad was inset to the left.

Her fingers punched the numbers, 5-3-9-1-0.

The *Clarion* files included her birth date, May 10, 1939.

The door opened and a light came on, revealing three shelves.

She pointed at the top shelf. "There's where I keep my jewelry. I found the safe door open and the case on the floor."

"What else was taken?"

She swung the door shut. "Oh, I checked at once. But only the necklace was gone."

I looked at her curiously. "Don't you find that surprising?"

She shrugged and the silk rustled. "I suppose she was afraid to take more. Perhaps something disturbed her. Or perhaps only the necklace was wanted. It's very famous, you know. It's called Remembrance. My grandfather had it made for my grandmother when he came home safely from World War One. There have been many stories written about it. Perhaps Judith was commissioned to steal it."

I didn't argue. But, with a quick memory of Judith's defiant face, her dark blue eyes blazing, her lips tight in a defiant frown, I had difficulty casting her as anyone's accomplice. Judith was a loner as, of course, are many aspiring journalists, aloof enough to welcome a life of observation. But I had difficulty also in being sure of my judgment of Judith. I thought she was innocent because I didn't pick up either the cockiness of a clever criminal or the too-cautious fear of the guilty. What I sensed was anger, pulsing as steadily as a heartbeat.

Moreover, early in the fall Judith had found my purse in the parking lot—I still wasn't clear how it had been taken from my locked office while I was in class—and nothing was missing. Not that I would have expected anything to be, but once a thief, always a thief, and she need not have returned the purse at all, had she wished to strip it of cash and credit cards.

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But there was something about Judith I couldn't gauge.

However, I simply said mildly, "Leaving the safe door open immediately exposed Judith to suspicion. If the door had been shut, when might you have discovered the necklace to be missing?"

Her eyes swung toward me, widening in surprise. Clearly, this had not occurred to her. "Why . . . I suppose . . . not until the Hall of Fame dinner. Next week."

I let her think about it.

She spoke quickly. "But no one else knows the combination, only I and my secretary."

I made no comment. Her family and staff would know her birthday and I felt sure if those dates were the basis for this combination; she'd used them elsewhere. "Do you have voice mail?"

"Yes."

"What is your pass code? One, nine, three, nine?"

Her silence answered me.

I didn't bother to ask about her credit card PIN. If it wasn't the same, I'd be very surprised.

Anyone with access to the safe could have tried various combinations: her birthday, the home address, hell, the telephone number. Savvy burglars do a little homework before breaking in.

But if I'd harbored any doubts about Judith's innocence, the open safe door answered them. All Judith had to do was swing the safe shut and she would be no more suspect than anyone who'd been in the house until the next time the safe was opened. To be sure, Judith would have been the last person to have handled the jewels, but that proved nothing.

In my interview with Judith, she'd sworn she'd closed the safe. ("Mrs. Collins, I pulled on the handle to be sure.")

"It's an interesting point." I paused, then said, as if the thought had just come to me, "I suppose a necklace that famous has always been a security concern?"

She stood as stiffly as a dog scenting a snake-infested log. I pressed on. "When did you install a safe here in the library?"

"Some years ago." Her tone was wooden.

"Since the earlier theft of the necklace? From your mother's bedroom?"

Her face drained of color, leaving her cheeks as pasty as puddled candle wax.

It was so quiet I could hear her thin, quick breaths.

"The necklace *was* stolen some years ago, wasn't it? The police were

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called in, then suddenly the matter was dropped. Is that right?"

"No. No. There was a mistake, that's all. The necklace was simply mislaid."

"But wasn't there some question of someone on the staff being involved?"

I could hear Vicky Marsh's low breathless voice, "Henrie O, it was a four-alarm scandal. Some people thought Natalie's mother sold it for gambling debts. Another camp was sure Natalie's older brother got drunk and gave it to a current girlfriend. All anyone can be sure of is that Calvin Wherry, her grandfather, called the cops, then it was dropped like a rock. But the maid and chauffeur were gone the next week. Everybody clammed up. And six months later, Natalie married Tolman Pearson, the most boring old bachelor in town but a golfing buddy of Natalie's grandfather. They say she cried all night before the wedding. He must be twenty-five years older than she is." Vicky pushed tortoiseshell glasses higher on her nose. "No children. But her brother still lives with them. Old Mrs. Wherry's in a rest home, gaga, so I hear."

Mrs. Pearson turned away, walked stiffly back to her desk. "It was a long time ago. No one knows exactly what happened. But the necklace turned up. So it doesn't matter." She faced me. Her arms pressed tightly against her body.

If it didn't matter . . .

I smiled. "Funny, the stories that get around. But this time there has definitely been a theft?"

"As I said," her tone was venomous, "the necklace was simply mislaid some years ago. Now it has been stolen."

"But you want to find out what happened?"

"Of course."

"All right, I'll be glad to help, if I can." I spoke as if I'd been invited. "I'll talk to the others who were in the house." I kept my voice easy. "They may have seen something which will give us information."

"It's Judith. Of course it is." She rubbed one temple. "All right, talk to them. I want it settled."

The piercing whistle eased as the woman picked up the tea kettle. "Only way to make tea. Good hot water."

Steam plumed in the air as she splashed the boiling water into two pots. "No tea bags in this kitchen, thank you, ma'am." She brought the tray to the sunny breakfast table where I waited.

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Ruth Fitch settled into the chair opposite me, her pudgy face pink with exertion. "Well, we've had us a week, that's for sure. I had to make the tea double strong the morning the necklace went missing. I thought Mrs. Pearson was going to faint. She was white as a ghost. Whiter! And that girl was just downright rude."

"Judith?" I poured the tea through the silver strainer.

The housekeeper nodded vigorously, her gray curls bouncing. "Yes, ma'am. When Mrs. Pearson asked if she knew where the necklace was, that girl flung up her head and snapped back that she'd put it away and if it was gone, someone else had taken it, and she didn't like the suggestion she'd had anything to do with it and she wasn't going to stay someplace where her honesty was doubted and she quit. And then she whirled around and ran out of the house. Set off all the alarms, too. And that was upsetting. She didn't even take her overnight bag. We had to send it the next day. And poor Mrs. Pearson, she didn't know what to do. Mr. Pearson came wandering in and he said I'd better call the police. Then the police came . . ."

Ruth Fitch had a runaway tongue, but it didn't take long to learn what she knew:

The burglar alarm didn't go off that night.

Mr. Pearson was interested in the missing jewelry, but Mrs. Pearson didn't want to talk about it, and she shut herself up in her room and said she had a sick headache.

Mrs. Pearson's brother, Harley Wherry, was, as usual, under the weather. (I took this as a euphemism for drunk.)

The catering staff was gone before the house was locked for the night.

Five people slept in the Wherry house the night of the theft: Judith Montgomery, Natalie Pearson, Tolman Pearson, Harley Wherry, and Mrs. Fitch.

The Pearsons occupy separate suites.

No, so far as she knew, Judith didn't know the code for the alarm system.

It wasn't like the good old days with a big staff, including a full-time maid and a chauffeur. No indeed. Now a cleaning service came in every week, a girl came in twice a week to dust, Mrs. Fitch handled the housekeeping, except for large parties, and Mr. and Mrs. Pearson drove themselves.

I sipped at the Earl Grey. "Were you working here when the necklace disappeared some years ago?"

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She glanced over her shoulder, then spoke softly, "I'm surprised Mrs. Pearson told you about that. Did you know she's always hated that necklace? Ever since that time? It was the strangest thing. To this day nobody knows what really happened. Later everybody guessed that Terry Parker—he was the chauffeur—took it. No one ever saw him here again after it was gone." She pulled her chair closer to mine, with another swift glance at the closed kitchen door. "But Leola, his wife, was as honest as anybody ever could be, and she left, too. She was the maid. I heard she took their little girl and moved to Springfield, but nobody knows for sure. Years later, somebody told me Leola lived in Springfield, and she'd remarried, so I don't know what happened to Terry. He was too good-looking to ever last for any woman. You know the kind, eyes that tell you you're the most gorgeous woman in the world and a wicked smile, the kind that makes women forget they've got any sense at all. Oh, he could charm everybody. And laugh! He'd get you laughing till you almost cried. He always had a kind word for everybody. Leola adored him and so did their little girl. I remember he always called her Baby. I thought to myself, a schoolgirl should have a name, but that was Terry, making everybody feel special. He called Leola Dream Girl." She ducked her head. "Why, he called me Petunia." Her cheeks dimpled. "Anyway, the necklace was kept in Mrs. Wherry's jewel box. It disappeared and then everybody was so shocked when it turned up the next week, hidden in the toe of one of Mrs. Wherry's dancing slippers." Suddenly her pink mouth formed a sudden perfect O of surprise. "Why, it was after the Hospital Ball that time, too! Why, isn't that the strangest coincidence!"

Coincidences do happen.

But I always give them a second look.

Tolman Pearson sighted along the imaginary line from his golf ball to the hole. He had beautiful form, firm wrists, his arms and shoulders moving together, just like a pendulum. Easy to describe, difficult to do. The ball rolled obediently eight feet and curled into the cup.

"Change the holes every week. Still, you get to know the turf. But it's nice to have my own putting green."

Only the top of the three-story stone house was visible from the putting green, which was over a hill from the terraces.

"You're a good golfer." I didn't make it a question.

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"Yes. Best sport in the world. Nothing else can compare."

He was seventy-nine and looked sixty-five. Indolence agreed with him.

"I'm interested in the disappearance of your wife's necklace."

He bent down, picked up the ball, walked a few paces, dropped the ball over his shoulder. "Don't mind if I putt, do you?"

I didn't suppose it mattered to him if I did. "Of course not."

Once again, he eyed the imaginary line. "Quite a magnificent necklace, you know." He studied the grass. "Funny thing is, it disappeared for a while the year Natalie and I got married. She told me Harley pinched it, but her grandfather made him put it back. I tried to talk to Calvin about it, but he wouldn't ante. Suppose it was true about Harley. But, there it is, it was a long time ago." Once again, that sure, confident stroke, and the ball rolled to the cup, dropped in. "Don't suppose it matters. Natalie doesn't like to talk about it." He walked to the hole, picked up the ball. "Actually, I don't even think she would have called the police this time if I hadn't insisted. I came downstairs for breakfast and found everyone in a panic. But you can't lose a fortune and not do something. The insurance fellows wouldn't like it."

"So you've made a claim for the necklace."

Pale blue eyes swung toward me. For an instant, they lost their good-natured gleam. "Of course."

Harley Wherry was amiably drunk, but it was such an habitual state there was only the slightest thickening to his voice. ". . . so that's why old Tolman's never wanted to make any investments with me. Trust my dear little sister to queer my pitch. But," he moved languidly in the massive red leather chair in a dim corner of a downstairs clubroom, "that's all right. Poor old Nat. She's never had much fun. I've always had fun. My number one rule in life is to do whatever the hell I want to. Makes sense, right? So, I'll let Tolman keep on thinking I'm the light-fingered Harry. Thing about it is, I think Sis stole the jewels the first time around. And, somehow, the Old Man—that's my grandfather, and he was the closest thing to a Prussian general you ever met—caught her at it. Why else did she marry Tolman? She sure as hell didn't want to." A chuckle ended in a hiccup. He reached out a thin, languid hand, so like his sister's but ringless, and picked up a full tumbler. He lifted it and drank. "But this time, it has to be the secretary. Too bad. Cute little thing." His mouth curved in a sala-

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cious smile. His face was almost a replica of his sister's except his cheeks sagged with dissipation, and his eyes were rheumy. "Can't see why Sis would do it. Of course, I never knew why she did it the first time."

Don Brown looks like an average thirtyish guy, almost nondescript, not too tall, slender, with a narrow, often weary face. But a perceptive viewer will note the quick intelligence in his eyes, the deliberate lack of expression, the wiry athletic build of a long-distance runner.

He's a cop, a good one.

And he's my friend, one of the best. A good enough friend that he now calls me Henrie O, the nickname given to me by my late husband Richard. Richard said, "Sweetheart, you pack more surprises into a single day than O. Henry ever put in a short story."

Don Brown and I met when I'd first moved to Derry Hills and a young blond woman was strangled in the apartment next to the one where I was staying temporarily.

We've come a long way since that day. I'd thought him too young to be a detective. He'd thought me too old to be of any assistance. We were both wrong.

On Sunday afternoon, he lounged comfortably in a rattan chair on my screened porch, a mug of coffee cradled in his slender hands. "I copied the file." He nodded at the Manila folder on the rattan coffee table. "Sue Rodriguez has the case. She thinks it's clearly an inside job, but it's a puzzler because the primary suspect, Judith Montgomery, doesn't strike Sue as stupid. So, why didn't Montgomery shut the safe, delay the discovery? Moreover, there are no fingerprints on the safe door and the buttons on the electronic panel were smudged. The last person to punch the numbers wore gloves. Why would Montgomery wear gloves? She was supposed to put the necklace away. Her prints should be there. Moreover, she slammed out of the house the next morning—apparently they made her mad—and she was wearing, according to the housekeeper and Mrs. Pearson, a thin chambray blouse and jeans tight enough to fit an eel and carrying a tiny purse. The necklace is big. No way she could have taken it out in a pocket or in that purse. Judith Montgomery didn't know the house alarm system and it hadn't been turned off when she left. When she yanked open the front door, the alarm sounded and Mrs. Fitch had to turn it off. So Montgomery didn't snitch the necklace and

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pass it to a confederate. Any opened window or door would have sounded the alarm."

"We can't be certain she hadn't somehow learned the alarm code." I sipped at my coffee and pushed the plate with sugar cookies closer to Don.

He took one. A crumb straggled down his chin as he continued. "True. But if Montgomery took the necklace, she's made no move to unload it. Sue's had her under around-the-clock surveillance." He finished the cookie. "So now, Henrie O, tell me how you got involved."

"Judith's one of my students."

"Investigating a jewel theft isn't in your job description. I guess your reputation as a sleuth is getting around."

I shrugged it away, but I suppose it was flattering to think students saw me as something other than a teacher or a retired reporter. "I'm afraid I haven't come up with much this time."

I told him what I'd learned. Not enough to clear Judith. Not even enough to implicate anyone else, and the list of others had to be confined to Natalie Pearson, Tolman Pearson, Harley Wherry, or Mrs. Fitch, and a less likely crew of jewel thieves I'd never seen.

I shook my head. "Nothing makes sense, Don. Why? Why would any one of them do it? Money? The family has money. As for Judith and Mrs. Fitch, how could they make the right kind of connection to fence a necklace like that?"

I refilled our mugs. "Don, there's something odd about the whole setup. I keep thinking there's some connection to the disappearance of the necklace some years ago. I found a story in the *Clarion,* October seventeenth, nineteen eighty-three. There was only one story, then the investigation was dropped. There was no hint it was thought to be an inside job."

Don drank his coffee, his eyes squinted in thought. But, finally, he shook his head. "Got me, Henrie O. It has a funny feel to it. But you'll get there. You always do."

I didn't share his confidence.

Monday morning after my nine-o'clock class, I returned to my office to find two messages.

I called Don first.

"Henrie O, talk about twists and turns! In Sue's mail this morning, there was a typed note with this message: *The necklace is hidden in Natalie Pearson's closet. Ask her why.* Sue's already had the

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note to the lab. It's written on Tolman Pearson's stationery and it has his fingerprints on it. Sue's huddling with the chief right now."

"The insurance company will find this quite interesting."

"Won't they?" Don agreed. "And, of course, it's a misdemeanor to report a false crime. I'd say Natalie Pearson's got some problems."

I've been around investigations of all kinds for a good many more years than Don. "Actually, Don, I doubt it. I'll bet you a ticket to the Cards' opening day next spring that it will be déjà vu all over again: The lost shall be miraculously found and no more will be said."

There was an instant of silence. "It would simplify life for the chief, wouldn't it? I'll let you know, Henrie O."

The second call was to the registrar's office in Greene County. I wrote down the information I'd asked for—the issuance of a marriage license sometime after 1983 to Leola Parker.

I wanted to talk to Leola Parker, find out more about handsome Terry, who was seen no more after the first disappearance of the necklace. And if Leola had moved to Springfield, been rumored to have married again, there was a good chance that second marriage took place in Springfield.

It had.

Sometimes basic reporting, going after facts to flesh out a story, can turn up surprising leads. I stared down at the names I'd written:

Leola Baker Parker to John Milton Montgomery.

Oh, oh, and oh.

I tapped my pen against the paper.

I ran through some facts in my mind:

1. The open safe door.
2. Smudged fingerprints.
3. Leola Parker was an honest woman.
4. Natalie Wherry wept the night before she wed.

I now had an idea why.

But I still needed certain facts.

Mrs. Fitch had her own telephone line at the Wherry house. When she answered, I had one question.

What time did Natalie Pearson eat breakfast the morning the jewels were discovered missing?

As she concluded, I said, "Thank you, Mrs. Fitch. I'll—"

"Mrs. Collins, have you heard? Mrs. Pearson found the necklace in her closet. Why, it's just the strangest thing! In the toe of a

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pump, just like last time! Mrs. Collins, have you ever heard of such a thing?"

"I imagine it will turn out to be some kind of a joke, Mrs. Fitch."

"Well, Mrs. Pearson doesn't think it's funny!"

"I'm sure she doesn't. Nor," I said a trifle grimly, "do I. Thank you, Mrs. Fitch."

I hung up the phone.

I had one more person to talk to—if she would see me.

Our shoes grated against the pebbled walk. The Italian terraces rose behind us. There was no one near.

Natalie Pearson walked with her head down, her hands clasped tightly behind her back. "Mrs. Collins, I have to know *why*. Not because it matters legally. The matter is officially closed, both by the police and the insurance company. Actually," Natalie Pearson's voice was bitter, "everyone seems to think I took the necklace and hid it, even though that makes no sense at all." Her eyes glittered with anger. "But I have to know why. Why would this young woman whom I don't know involve me in this—this grotesque charade? Why, Mrs. Collins?"

"I believe I know."

She stopped, faced me, her gaze demanding.

But this time I didn't see pride or arrogance. This time I saw pain and despair.

"I will explain what happened, Mrs. Pearson, if you will tell me the truth about the first disappearance."

A pulse throbbed in her throat.

I spoke quietly. "Terry Parker took the necklace from your mother's room. Is that right?"

A breeze rustled the cedars behind us. In the sunlight, her quite perfect, lifeless hair was touched with gold.

I could see that she'd had a fragile beauty when she was younger, before her eyes lost hope.

Natalie Pearson met my gaze squarely. "No, Mrs. Collins. I took the necklace. I gave it to Terry."

We gazed at each other.

Her mouth quirked in a wry, sad smile. "You don't look surprised."

"No. I understand he was handsome. And charming."

"Oh yes. He made love to me. We were going to run away together. I gave him the necklace and the next night I was to meet

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him at the train station." She stared down at the shadows splashed along the sidewalk. "He didn't come."

Three little words, and the sorrow and loss they conveyed could never be summed up or judged or understood.

"And the necklace?"

"The next week Leola Parker came to see my grandfather. I don't know how she knew about the necklace. She must have found it in Terry's things and demanded to know what it was all about. She gave the necklace to my grandfather and told him it was all my fault, that I'd persuaded Terry to take it and that Terry had now deserted her. My grandfather said I had a choice." Her voice was toneless, all the passion and pain leached away by the passage of time. "Be publicly revealed as a woman involved with the family chauffeur—or marry Tolman."

"You married Tolman, and all of this was behind you—until now."

"Yes. Now, Mrs. Collins, tell me why this has happened."

"Terry Parker—what did he look like?"

"He was very handsome. Black hair. Dark blue eyes. High cheekbones. A magical smile and a funny way his mouth crooked when he thought everything was wonderful . . ." Her voice trailed away.

She could have been describing Judith Montgomery.

"Oh, my God. It's Baby," she whispered.

I found Judith in the *Clarion* newsroom, at one of the desks used for general reporting.

She looked up from her computer as I stopped beside her.

"If you have a moment, Judith?"

"Oh yes, Mrs. Collins. What's happened?"

"Quite a bit." I led the way to my office and closed the door. I settled behind my desk.

She sat demurely in a chair, facing me.

But she was electric with excitement, her eyes bright, a becoming flush in her cheeks.

"Have you heard that the necklace has been found?"

Pleasure glistened now in her eyes. Pleasure and an almighty cockiness. "Oh, really? Then they owe me an apology, don't they? I'll demand it. And if they don't—if *she* doesn't apologize—I'll write a story for the *Clarion.*"

"No."

Suddenly, her face was still, smooth, stiff. "No? Why not? I've

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been accused of theft. And they had no right. It's just like—" She stopped short.

"Yes, Judith? Like what?"

She stared at me, knowing something was wrong.

"Why don't you tell me about it—Baby."

Her face twisted with fury. "*She* took the necklace. Years ago. *She* took it. But she blamed my father—and so he ran away. That's what happens when people are rich and powerful, they can put the blame on someone else. Mother told me all about it, how *she* went after my dad, turned his head, persuaded him to run away with her. It's all *her* fault."

"Fault." I sighed. "That's what you've done, isn't it? You've blamed Natalie for your dad's running away. But think a little further, Judith; he didn't have to run away. Your mother returned the necklace. Your father left because he wanted to. Maybe he changed his mind about Natalie, maybe your mother faced him down. It doesn't matter. Yes, Natalie took the necklace, but she took it for him, to have him."

"No." It was a child's cry. "No. If it weren't for her, I would have had my dad, he wouldn't have gone away."

"Oh yes. Someday he would have. Because that's who and what he was. Your mother blamed Natalie because she didn't want to blame him. Everyone always made excuses for Terry Parker. Wherever he is now, you can bet he's left behind people who loved him. And he's left behind a legacy of bitterness. You spent years thinking about it, and thinking how you could pay back the woman you blame for losing your father. That's why you came to school here. That's why you applied for the job as Natalie Pearson's secretary. Tell me, how many jobs did you turn down, for one reason or another, until you got what you wanted? You became her secretary and you waited for the right opportunity. The night you put the necklace away, you added sleeping pills to Mrs. Pearson's drink."

Her eyes widened, her mouth opened.

"How did I know? Because she overslept the next morning, by more than an hour. When she came down to breakfast, she mentioned feeling headachy to Mrs. Fitch. That could have been dangerous, Judith. You don't know what medicines she takes. But you were focused on your plan.

"That night, as she slept heavily, you crept into her room and hid the necklace in her closet, in the toe of a shoe, just as you'd

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heard that the necklace was found so long ago. From Mrs. Fitch, I imagine. I imagine you polished it so it would have no fingerprints. You made yourself a suspect, but you were careful to make it look wrong, the safe door open, no fingerprints on the door, the fingerprints smudged on the electronic panel. And the next morning, leaving in tight clothes with a small purse, not taking your overnight bag, setting off the alarm. You thought of everything."

She eyed me carefully. "You can't prove anything."

"I don't need to. I know. And you know."

She shoved back her chair, her face defiant. "What are you going to do?" She was poised to run.

"It is a crime to lie to a police officer during the course of an investigation."

"So?"

"It could be grounds for suspension from school."

She waited, her body tense. "What are you going to do?"

"That depends upon you, Judith. You see, I'd like for you to let go of the past, focus that thought and energy and passion on the future. Your future. You're smart, quick, clever. For example, you wanted someone to take up your cause. That's where I came in. You took my class and very quickly you figured out that I have a passion for the underdog and I thumb my nose at the powerful. You figured out a way to use me. First, you set it up so that I would be sure of your honesty. What did you do? This is an old building, did you try a bunch of keys until you found one that opened my office, then wait for a good time to snatch my purse?"

Her eyes flickered.

"I thought so. And then you called on me to help an underdog in need. And I couldn't wait to put on my Superman cape and get into the fray."

Something in my tone surprised her.

I managed a wry grin. "Yes. I'm at fault here, too. How rebellious do I come across in class? I need to give some thought to that. You see, Judith, as hard as it ever is to know someone else, it is harder to know ourselves. So let's make a deal: You put the necklace—Remembrance—behind you for good, for always, and look to yourself for the direction of your life, not your father or your mother or Natalie Pearson. And I promise that I won't—next time—assume that the underdog is always right."

As I told Don later, one is never too young to change—or too old to learn. ●

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NEXT ISSUE...

The Last Open File
BY MARCIA MULLER

A Gift of Murder
BY WILLIAM BANKIER

Never a Cross Word
BY PETER LOVESEY

The Horseshoe Nail
BY BILL PRONZINI

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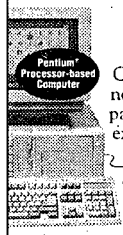

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

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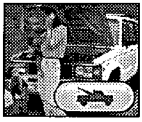
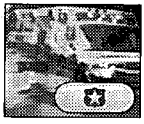
The SOS Phone offers a 24-hour call center to connect you with your emergency roadside service, 911 service or family members in the event of an emergency.



The SOS Phone gives you instant access to the emergency service you need, from towing to 911, even a family member or friend.



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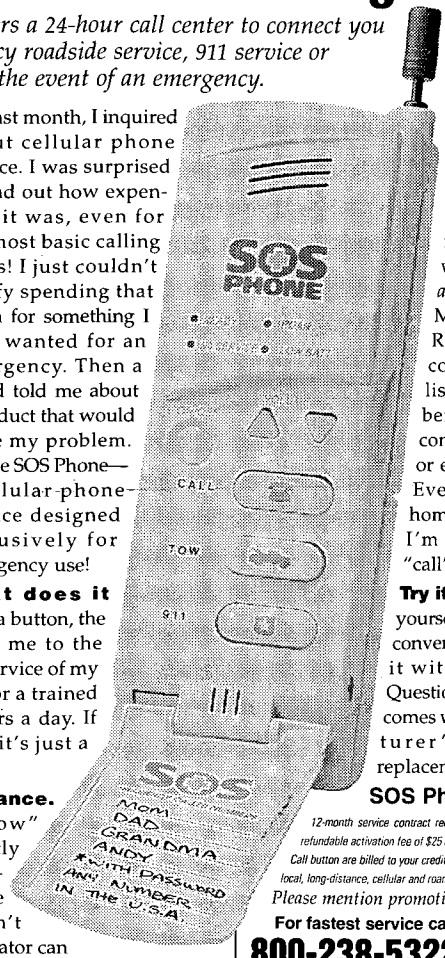
Emergency assistance. By pressing the "tow" button, I'll be instantly connected to my emergency roadside service provider. Or, if I don't have one, the SOS operator can recommend one and dispatch them immediately.

The "911" button connects me to the 911 emergency service in my area—best of all, the call is absolutely free!



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Try it yourself. Why not try it yourself? If you don't enjoy its convenience and security, return it within 90 days for a "No Questions Asked" refund. It also comes with a three-year manufacturer's limited repair or replacement warranty.

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12-month service contract required for this price. Requires a one-time non-refundable activation fee of $25 and a monthly charge of $9.95. Calls made on the Call button are billed to your credit card at $1.45 per minute. (That rate includes all local, long-distance, cellular and roaming fees.) For outgoing calls only.

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HEALTH UPDATE
before
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—Gina Muta
after

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European wisdom about periodically cleansing the body by abstaining from solid foods is the foundation for the Aspen Spa Six-Day BioDiet. This program of vegetable and fruit juice meals and metabolic enhancers cleanses impurities and takes off up to 14 pounds in six days!

All-natural. Ingredients are selected for freshness, purity and nutritional value. BioDiet's unique blend of nature's best ingredients put your body on the fast track to improved health and weight loss.

Scientifically formulated. BioDiet's juice cocktails and dietary supplements are formulated to meet your daily nutritional requirements.

Six days to a new you. Commit yourself to the program and you'll soon feel the effects of detoxification and weight loss!

After you complete the program, extend your commitment to a healthier lifestyle by choosing high-fiber, low-fat foods. If you haven't reached your weight-loss goals, use BioDiet in alternating six-day cycles until you reach your desired weight.

On days one, three and five, you'll drink the fruit cocktail, which contains juice from blackberries, white grapes, apples, pineapples, oranges and bananas.

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